

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)[Next Page](#)**Volume 1****Chapter 1-1**

## Chapter 1: The Beautiful Young Princess

The doorbell rang—it had already been two hours.

They were intermittent sounds. Occasionally, when the ringing would stop, the sound of a few dozen knocks on the door would take its place. Once more, the doorbell rang. This was the sound of an act of aggression. Mariko Sugihara (who was renting the apartment) covered her ears with both of her hands, curled up on the couch, and frantically tried to endure it. She turned up the volume on both her television and radio in an attempt to drown out the noise while remaining in her room, continuing to have nothing to do with the man outside her door. She chose to stay in her room, tortured by the sounds he made. The man's intention was to make her feel guilty. It would have probably continued on like this for a while until she showed her intent to apologize, then opened the door and let the man in.

In her short time living here, it was constantly like this.

She had enrolled in university—in addition to coming to the capital—and had begun living by herself. Since then, no less than half a year had passed. Until just recently, it was not like this. Life itself was comfortable; she had met her first boyfriend in her club at university. He was a young man, who had a refreshing sportsman-like air about him, named Yanagawa. He had shown her around, as she was not familiar with the city. Having been born and raised in a quiet countryside town, she enjoyed lightheartedly mocking the routines of everyday life in the city when with Yanagawa or while socializing during her college life.

A single letter was an omen that all of this would fall apart.

One day, in her mailbox, she received an envelope missing the sender's name. It contained only a single piece of paper. Written on the letter was one sentence: "I love you." Because there was no stamp on the envelope, she came to the conclusion that the sender himself had to have come and put it in her mailbox personally. This thought gave her a bad feeling, so she tore the letter up and then threw it away.

Again, on the following day, there was a letter in her mailbox. Mariko began shivering because it was the same letter from yesterday that she had already torn up and thrown away. Before heading to school, she had thrown the letter away in a plastic bag with the burnable trash in the apartment complex's garbage collection area. The sender of the letter discovered this and taped the torn-up letter fragments back together and once again placed it in Mariko's mailbox. "No way, this can't be happening," she said, shaking as she cut the letter apart with scissors. That night, she threw the letter away in one of the trash cans on her college campus.

Again, on the following day, there was a letter in her mailbox.

Every piece of the letter she had torn up was carefully taped back together, and the words "I love you" were distorted. Whoever sent the letter had been watching her. Moreover, he had gone through her university's trash and taken the letter out. Was this guy one of those "stalkers" who I often see mentioned on television and in magazines?

Mariko completely closed her curtains. Then, after burning the letter, she threw it away and went to the police to tell them what had happened. She had at first decided to tell Yanagawa as well, but then decided that in a situation like this, it was more reasonable to rely on the police. The police were calm when dealing with her, but they were way too calm about the situation. It was better for her to not go over every last detail about her experience with the stalker. The police did not have the time to diligently examine every last detail. These days, when even at the best of times the number of violent crimes was increasing, the kind of situation Mariko was coming to them with was considered minor, and as such, she would simply be told to be more careful.

Still, Mariko persisted.

"If you just play along with that pervert, won't he eventually give up?" was the only advice she was carelessly given. It seemed too cruel for her to try. But when she remembered her resentment towards the stalker, she was then able to convince herself that there was some sense in the suggestion. But if he knew she had a boyfriend, wouldn't it be expected for him to give up? It would make her much more comfortable to live with Yanagawa. Mariko was the only one among her peers to not have sex yet; her relationship with Yanagawa had not yet progressed to a point where they would have a conversation about it. She still had the courage to live together with him, but just letting him stay in her room would likely lead to something more.

Mariko decided to talk to Yanagawa about living together. While Yanagawa was immersed in the pleasant feeling of being able to rely on the woman that he loved, he was even more heart-struck by how she entrusted herself in him first. Yanagawa was apparently part of a karate club when he was in high school and had boasted confidently about his skill. It had been a while since he had stayed at Mariko's and he was extremely enthusiastic about catching her stalker. Mariko was finally at ease. She embraced the somewhat naive fantasy of living together with Yanagawa. If only there was time to go back to the way things were before.

Yanagawa arrived immediately. It was the first day that Yanagawa stayed at Mariko's home. The two of them stayed up late, talking throughout the night. However, just as they thought it was time to sleep, someone began knocking on the door. When they looked through the door's peephole they saw a tall, slender man in his late twenties standing there. With a stolid face, the man continued to knock on the door. Mariko was frightened. Refusing to just watch his girlfriend in such a state, Yanagawa immediately walked outside. He tried to peacefully persuade the man to leave. Meanwhile, hidden behind Yanagawa, Mariko took a picture of the man. If he tried to run away, having a picture to show the police should make them more likely to take action, as they would at least know what he looked like. The man avoided direct eye contact with Yanagawa, and with eyes that seemed as if they were painted black with ink, he looked only at Mariko. Mariko noticed the man murmur, "You burned my feelings, didn't you?" That would mean he knew she had burned his letter. Mariko's face went pale.

Yanagawa seemed to lose his temper after hearing what the man said to Mariko. And as he cracked his knuckles, he warned the man once more. When the man saw Yanagawa's fighting spirit, he immediately pulled out a knife that was concealed in the back of his waist, and with a single swing he cut off Yanagawa's right ear. What followed was completely one-sided. The man, seemingly to show off for Mariko, broke both of Yanagawa's arms, smashed in his nose, and broke both of his legs as well. Mariko was unable to stand out of shock from what she had just seen and expected the man to do the same to her. But the man was satisfied with just seeing her in such a state of fear, and with the parting words, "I will be back," he left.

Thus the days in which Mariko could only endure what had happened began. Yanagawa, who was hospitalized, afraid of the man's revenge, and having completely lost his self-confidence, refused to file a report against him with the police. At any rate, he told Mariko that he wanted to quickly forget it all and end his relationship with her. He was avoiding trouble. There is no person who would voluntarily choose to concern himself with trouble, much less endanger his own life. Like when she had said the unreasonable and decided to come to the capital without telling her parents in the countryside, it seemed that Mariko had made another mistake by speaking to her friends at college about what had happened. There were people who listened simply because they were interested in gossip, but there was no one who would actually help her. On the contrary, the people around her said that the cause of the

situation laid on her side. "You had a chance to do something about it, but you let it happen anyway. You reap what you sow, you know." Those were the kind of comments she had heard, mixed with laughter even, and everyone around her seemed to agree. And so Mariko gave up on speaking about the matter at school.

Perhaps what they said might have been right. Maybe she was the one completely at fault.

As she listened to the echoing of the doorbell and the sound of knocking, that is what she thought. If that's the case, then what's happening now is punishment. I am receiving punishment for the bad things I have done. Gods, please forgive me. Somehow, please find it in your hearts to forgive me. She grasped the rosary that her grandmother had given her when she left the countryside, held it between her two shivering hands, and prayed. By doing this, what could possibly happen? The sounds of knocking on the door and the ringing of the doorbell suddenly stopped.

She stopped and waited for a while, but the silence continued.

The only thing she could hear was the ticking of her clock.

*...Have I been forgiven?*

Once it seemed like that was so, a voice spoke into her ear while she was still clasping her hands together, ready to continue praying.

"You want to be forgiven?"

She let out a scream and quickly turned her head to the direction of the voice.

Those eyes that seemed as if they were painted black with ink were staring back at her.

She saw from the corner of her eye, the curtains fluttering in the wind. *Could he have come in through the window?* They were on the third floor, but it was not an impossible height to climb. If that was the case, then that was how he got inside.

As the man observed her frightened state, he spoke with a parched voice.

"Have you reflected upon what you did? Have you earnestly reflected upon how you burned and threw away my feelings?"

Mariko nodded her head frantically.

She believed that if she did not do so, he would kill her.

"Were you asking me for forgiveness?"

She nodded her head again.

The man touched the trail of tears flowing down her face with his finger.

"If that is so, then say it. Say, 'please find it in your heart to forgive me.' "

"Plea... f-for... me..."

She tried to plead to him, but she was paralyzed with fear and couldn't breathe well, which made her unable to continue.

The man widened his eyes, though they seemed to almost protrude out.

"...Are you not going to say it?"

The man placed his hands around her neck. This power, which easily broke Yanagawa's thick arms, completely constricted her slender neck. Mariko, whose breathing was forcibly stopped, flailed her arms and legs about, her tongue stretched out from her mouth. The man saw this and laughed.

"All women are like this. If they don't have a painful experience, then they will not understand. If they don't get hurt, then they won't sympathize. They are unbearably stupid."

When the man removed his hands from around her neck, he paid no mind to her violent coughing and instead revealed some packing tape from his pocket. She sensed that he was going to bind her up with that. What is destined for me after this? He is going to kidnap me and hold me captive somewhere forever.

Then he will break me.

I would be broken by him.

The man began to bind her hands and feet with the packing tape. She did not have the energy to resist. He then grabbed her jaw and forced her to look at him.

"Do you feel like apologizing?"

She moved her mouth but not a sound came out.

The man put his strength into the hand holding her by the jaw.

"Apologize, apologize, apologize."

Tears began to flow from Mariko's eyes, and when it seemed that she had decided to let out a small voice, a more pronounced voice came in its place.

"Since she hasn't done anything wrong, there's no reason for her to apologize, now is there?"

The man took his gaze away from Mariko and she faced her eyes in the direction from which the voice came from.

At the entrance of her room, there stood a lone boy.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 1-1**

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Translation Notes and References

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 1-2**

He had gentle features—like someone who always sits in the corner of the classroom with their face buried in a novel. He was neither tall nor short and had an average physique. Was he coming home from school? He was wearing a school uniform and carrying a bag under his arm.

Mariko had met this boy once before.

The boy lowered his head and with a troubled face said:

“I am sorry for coming late. I intended to come sooner, but it took me a while to get prepared. Please allow me to apologize for opening your door and letting myself in. You should get your lock replaced as soon as possible. I was able to get inside because it was one of those cheap, multipurpose locks.”

“Who the hell are you?”

The man took his hands off of Mariko and motionlessly observed the boy.

The boy answered calmly,

“Shinkurou Kurenai.”

“Shinkurou...Kurenai...?”

The man turned to Mariko and faced her towards him again.

“Who is this bastard?”

“He’s, Shi, Shinkurou!”

Mariko’s fear faded and she shouted this in sheer joy.

“This man will definitely save—”

“What makes you so sure about that?! ”

The man raised his fist and Mariko closed her eyes, but the pain that she anticipated did not come. Shinkurou threw his bag and it hit the man’s arm with an intense force. The man howled in pain, letting Mariko go. Shinkurou then took this opportunity to move Mariko safely behind him.

“I will end this quickly.”

Shinkurou said this, but Mariko noticed that his legs were slightly shivering, and she became anxious. Prompted by her surroundings, Mariko grasped her rosary and recited a prayer that she had learned from her grandmother, while being careful to not move from where she stood.

The man was probably surprised by Shinkurou's appearance. Nevertheless, he remained calm. The man backed up to make more space between him and Shinkurou, then took out a knife from the back of his pants. He prepared his blade of about thirty centimeters and made his way towards Shinkurou. When faced with a situation in which one is at knifepoint, there is no one who would not waver to at least some small extent. Shinkurou, however, effortlessly diverted the blade which was thrust at him with the back of his hand, and then kicked the man in the groin. Had he hit him in a very precise spot? With only that, the man stopped moving and the knife fell from his hand. Then, while holding his groin with both of his hands, he advanced several steps towards them. But before reaching either Shinkurou or Mariko, he collapsed forward. When Mariko quietly approached the man to look at him, he foamed at the mouth and completely fainted.

After using the packing tape to bind the hands and feet of the man, Shinkurou spoke to Mariko.

"For now, let's leave him like that."

"Is it... over?"

"No, there's still more to do."

Shinkurou lifted the man onto his shoulder. He did not seem like he had the strength to carry the man, but he easily carried him to the entrance of the apartment. He then called someone on his cell phone. Not long after he did this, several men appeared at the apartment door. All of the men had evil countenances. Mariko began to doubt Shinkurou and felt that she may have been tricked, but this was repudiated with a strained laugh.

"I'm sorry for frightening you. Well, has that ensured your safety?"

"It has, but..."

"To ensure that, it's important that something is done to this man. I called these people here to help me do just that. Since you've already told me your story, you can take it easy for a while."

Shinkurou struck the back of the fainted man's neck and firmly applied pressure. The man immediately woke up. Once he saw the situation he was in, it seemed as if he might struggle. He was unexpectedly calm, however.

"...I won't give up."

While looking at Mariko, he said with a hate filled voice,

"I won't give up. I will make sure that you are mine."

The man then moved his eyes toward Shinkurou and scornfully said,

"So what are you going to do to me? Call the cops? Beat me up? Whatever you do, it'll be pointless. I won't forget you. I'm persistent. No matter how many years it takes, I will track you down and make you regret having ever done this. I will make you regret it."

It was clear that the man's words were serious. Mariko felt that someday tragedy would befall her and Shinkurou. Shinkurou, on the other hand, did not seem to particularly care.

"You're Kaoru Tabuchi right?"

The man did not reply, but Shinkurou continued.

"Lately, there has been an investigation linked to a particular photo. So, are you okay with the heat?"



"...What?"

"Because it's hot over there and it'll be rather terrible if you can't handle the heat."

Shinkurou signaled to the men waiting outside of the apartment door to come in. The men gagged Tabuchi and lifted him up. "What the hell are they going to do?" thought the bewildered Tabuchi, and then he was kindly told by Shinkurou:

"To be honest, there is a dam construction project going on in a foreign country. They are currently looking for workers it seems. It's a place without any recreational facilities or anything of the like, and the time it will take to construct is just the worst—more than a decade. Also, there is something else after that construction project is finished; it seems that if you leave Japan for more than twenty years, then you can't come back, so the number of applicants who were not forced is very low. So, because the contractor is very eager to get his work force ready, I decided to recommend you. Since you are so good at stalking, you should have the willpower for this, right? You have plenty of stamina for it too. Well, you should do your best. You can save up money, and I think you will come to thank the people there."

Tabuchi's face went pale. He likely realized from the look on the faces of the men holding him that what Shinkurou said was no joke. After this, he would have to spend several decades doing manual labor. No, he questioned how long he could survive it. Furthermore, in this kind of work, in this underworld of business, it was normal to collect people and push them to the limit through rigorous labor, then throw them away. This was essentially a death sentence.

At that moment, Tabuchi began pleading for his life. Unfortunately, due to the gag in his mouth, he could not relay this to anyone.

Shinkurou waved his hand in a manner as if he had done so a hundred times before, and Tabuchi was taken away.

The front door was closed and Mariko stood there for a while, dumbfounded.

Was that the end?

"Uh, um, what you just said, was that true...?"

"It was true."

Shinkurou explained to Mariko that the contractor he had entrusted Tabuchi with employed many criminals who cannot be in Japan, and that once they are employed they cannot leave until the work is finished.

As for Mariko, she was torn between thinking that he got what he deserved and that it was excessive punishment. Sympathizing with this, Shinkurou continued to explain in more detail. Shinkurou had an information broker he was acquainted with look into Tabuchi's history and found that he had been previously convicted of two crimes. He was released from prison just half a year ago. Prior to that, he had committed two crimes, both cases being acts of rape and confinement. The women he had victimized suffered deep emotional and physical damage, and are even still hospitalized. In short, he was a recidivist. He had already been taken in by the police and spent several years incarcerated; the chances of him planning his revenge and searching for another person to prey on were very high. It was for those reasons that Shinkurou had undergone such a unique correspondence.

"I have been told by the contractor that there has only been one person who has escaped since the beginning of the project. If he were to somehow escape, I would definitely catch him, and this time I would leave him stranded on a desert island."

It was unclear whether Shinkurou was serious or not, but that is what he said.

Mariko, who was finally relieved, looked once more at the boy named Shinkurou.

Had he done this based on the gossip at her college, or the police she had consulted with? It was rather dangerous, yet he took it on. Was he one of those people who deals with quarrels, and was just attracted to Mariko's story? If that were the case, wouldn't he have contacted her a few days ago? Could it be that she would have to pay a fee for some peace of mind? She almost forgot that she had requested this. It was hard to believe that he dealt with the situation so well.

"So, your request has been fulfilled. I will be kindly collecting my payment now."

"Thank you."

It seemed like Mariko, who was overjoyed, was going to tightly embrace Shinkurou, but she held herself back and instead handed him an envelope with the payment inside. After accepting it, Shinkurou checked the contents and then pulled out several notes, which he returned to Mariko.

"Because I came at the last minute, okay?"

"Wait, but..."

Out of gratitude, Mariko decided that he should have no complaints if she were to increase the amount tenfold. However, Shinkurou quickly closed the envelope and put it in his bag.

"Well then, with that—"

"U, um..."

It seemed that Mariko still wanted to talk a while longer, but Shinkurou gently waved his hand, headed towards the door, and completely disappeared. So that was the work of a dispute mediator?

Mariko looked at the closed door and felt as if all of her energy might suddenly escape her. She then collapsed backwards onto the floor. Outside of her window, the sky was dyed crimson. She noticed that dusk had just fallen.

Finally, everything was back to normal and her room was silent. She could peacefully recover now. When she felt a cold breeze blow in from the window, she was filled with a despair that prepared her for death and made her feel that she would disappear to some distant place.

This city is frightening, she thought. Yet, this city is also strange.

She had many frightening encounters yet she knew that these alone did not have the power to defeat her.

Mariko remembered the rosary that was in her hand. It had been a while since she had wanted to hear her grandmother's voice. Since it had been some time since Mariko had contacted her grandmother, she was probably worried sick. There were many things that she wanted to talk to her about.

Mariko securely locked her door and called home.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 1-2**



## Translation Notes and References

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)[Next Page](#)**Volume 1****Chapter 1-3**

“...It’s still too expensive~”

On the way home after work, Shinkurou, who had just done his grocery shopping for dinner, passed by an electronics store and saw a kotatsu (1) and kotatsu quilt set on sale at twenty percent off. Seeing this, he lingered in front of the store. In the coming season, he would be thankful for a kotatsu. But after doing the math in his head, he gave up on the idea. Instead, he bought a pack of cigarettes from a nearby vending machine; the brand was the same as usual. He put the cigarettes in his pocket and while carrying the grocery bag in one hand, he headed home.

A cold breeze blew through the shopping district. It felt like winter was approaching. Among a group of energetic grade-schoolers were some who were bundled up in scarves. Their mothers quickly gathered them up and left. Were they worried that as the day grew late, it would get too cold for their children? It was still only October, so all the cold weather and snow was rather strange. A dog that was left tied to a telephone pole drew its body in to escape the cold.

This was the first winter Shinkurou had experienced since becoming a high school student. By extension, it had been no less than a year since he had started in the dispute mediation business. That means that I should be pretty good at my job, thought Shinkurou.

His job earned him few thanks, a lot of hatred, and little honor—yet he somehow continued on.

If this were the case eight years ago, he would not have been able to imagine himself doing it. As he looked up at the setting sun, a nearby flock of crows cawed noisily as they flew around. This view had remained the same since long ago. The mass media always reproachfully warned of the severity of environmental destruction, but in actuality most people did not care. Most living creatures would notice changes in the environment that sustained them; however, there was no doubt that humans were different.

Shinkurou, who walked while pondering such thoughts, remembered that he had not yet read today’s newspaper, and so he decided to stop by the convenience store. The only people in the store were a bunch of unmotivated employees. Without a word ever being said, he was able to peruse the entire newspaper. For Shinkurou, who did not want to actually purchase any newspapers, this was a great store.

The pages lacked any true purpose. As always, they were mostly full of gloomy incidents and scandals. A middle school student stabs his mother to death because “she went to the restroom before me.” On a train, a mother’s crying infant is killed after being taken from her and thrown out of the window by a salaryman. A grade-schooler who ignored the warnings given to him was shot to death by a police officer. A serial rapist who targets children age five and under, and a child on the way home from cram school murdered by a drug addict were a few other incidents mentioned in the newspaper. Living in such excessively gruesome times, Shinkurou once asked, “Do you think God even exists?” To which he had been answered by his childhood friend Ginko Murakami:

"You haven't decided if God exists or not. It is precisely because he exists that there is only this much happening. The people committing those crimes make up a tiny portion of society. If God didn't exist, that kind of stuff would be inexcusable."

If that were the case, perhaps God already had his hands full.

So those were the times he didn't help?

Shinkuro began feeling depressed. After putting the newspaper back on the rack, he left the convenience store. The chill of the wind annoyed him as he made his way through the streets.

May Rain Manor, where Shinkuro lived, was an old apartment that was only a ten-minute walk from the train station. Surrounded by an abundance of shrubbery, it quietly existed as if the flow of time was different at this sole spot. It was two-stories high and made of reinforced concrete. There were six rooms, no baths, and a communal restroom.

After he walked through the old stone gate and into a relatively spacious area, to his immediate left was a large tree. Being unable to guess its age was one of the most splendid aspects about this tree, which gave off the impression that it was the master of the surrounding vegetation.

When Shinkuro looked up, he saw an acquaintance of his. Having sat down upon a large branch, a lone woman rested with her back against the tree's trunk. As for her attire, from the top of her head to the tip of her toes, she was dressed completely in black. She wore a black, wide-brimmed hat, black leather gloves, a black blouse, a long, black skirt and black high heels. Attached to her necklace was a single fist-sized skull charm. This woman, who had a black cat resting on her lap, could not be seen as anything but a witch. As this black witch nestled close to the old tree, she gazed at the twilight.

"Hey, Yamie."

When Shinkuro called out to Yamie, her eyes, which had been staring at the horizon, were shifted towards him. Despite lacking a feeling of vitality, her expressionless face gave off a bewitching beauty. Once she saw Shinkuro, however, a faint smile surfaced upon her face.

"Ah, boy. Coming back from work?"

"Yes."

"The working look is lovely. Make sure to do your best."

She said this in a very theatrical tone, but it did not feel the least bit out of place. This was probably because her existence itself was out of place. The first time that they met, Shinkuro believed that Yamie was a spirit haunting the building. There were some students in the neighborhood who had seen her, but their stories mainly consisted of them screaming and running away. At any rate, she was otherworldly.

Yamie was the tenant of room number four at May Rain Manor and the apartment complex's most mysterious person. Her occupation and age were a mystery as well, but she consistently sat in the tree at twilight.

When Shinkuro took out the pack of cigarettes from his pocket, the cat in Yamie's lap nimbly leapt to the ground and frolicked about his feet. This cat, which Yamie kept as a pet, was named David. Shinkuro stroked David's head and gave him the cigarettes. David skillfully carried the pack in his mouth and returned to his master's lap.

"Thank you, as always, boy."

Yamie took a cigarette out of the pack, placed it in her mouth, then lit it with a match. Using matches instead of a

lighter must have been a quirk of hers. She gently waved the match she had used, and—like magic—it went out. Yamie held the cigarette between her leather-clad fingers and blew out a puff of smoke. The wisp of smoke rode upon the passing breeze, then dissipated into the air. Shinkurou did not care much for cigarettes. When he saw someone smoking right in front of him, he felt uncomfortable. However, Yamie and one other person he knew were exceptions. He had grown accustom to them doing it, and rather if they were not to smoke, then it would feel unnatural to him.

“I think I asked you before, but is that skull real?”

“This?”

Yamie raised the skull up as if she were trying to hold it towards the setting sun.

“Well, this, you see, it was once a part of the man I loved.”

“Huh?”

“He was a strong man with a sense of justice, but... In any case, he said he wanted to report on the truth of society, so he became a freelance journalist and traveled around the world. As for when he returned, it’s actually quite an unusual story to tell. During his final moments, a conflict arose in a developing country where he was reporting. There, he stepped on a landmine and the sudden explosion blew off his leg and killed him. The place where his corpse was had been completely burned down. However, thanks to his will, he was brought back to me. I had then decided to wear this single, last part of him. It’s my own way of honoring him. If by doing this, it’s like having his spirit beside me, then he will always be on my mind.”

“Is, is that so...? Then, is that why you always wear black?”

“Yes, these are mourning clothes.”

“I’m sorry. I asked you something really strange...”

As Shinkurou looked down apologetically, Yamie calmly blew out a puff of smoke.

“For a story that I made up just now, that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Huh?”

“A full-grown man with a skull this size? You didn’t even consider using common sense.”

He now saw what she was talking about, but when she said it in such a matter-of-fact manner, he wondered how he was able to completely believe her story in the first place. It was probably because when it came to Yamie, strange things like that seemed possible.

“Um... so, what is it then?”

“This is something I found at a street stall a long time ago, in a foreign country. The shop owner had cut his prices again and again, eventually giving up on selling anything. But when I came, he cried and pleaded to me. Since the prices had been lowered so much, I bought something. It’s a fairly pleasant memory of mine. It suited me so I kept it. It’s probably the processed skull of a monkey fetus.”

“A monkey...?”

“By the way, the reason that I wear black is purely for fashion. As for when black clothing became popular, it was at the end of World War I in Paris, and the mourning dresses of widows were adopted for use by prostitutes. The accepted theory is simply because they were very attractive. The men being tantalized by the heartbroken women

and the black having brought out their beauty are also theories. But I suppose one could say that any mental state can make a woman beautiful."

"Ah, is that so..."

Shinkuro did not really understand her but he nodded his head anyway.

Yamie confusing Shinkuro was a common occurrence. Even though she thoroughly thought things out, there was no method to it.

Shinkuro remembered the groceries that he had bought and decided to head back to his room.

"Well, I'm going to be—"

"Boy, it seems you'll have women troubles."

"Women troubles?"

Shinkuro asked her again, but Yamie had already turned her gaze towards the twilight filled sky and had stopped paying him any mind. Yamie said important things as smoothly as if she were reciting a soliloquy. Maybe she was just putting into words what was on her mind. Regardless, he could not make light of what she had said.

*Women troubles, huh...*

Because he couldn't come up with any interpretation, he decided there was nothing he could do about it at the moment.

Shinkuro removed it from his mind, and after taking his shoes off in the entry area, he headed to room number five while swinging the grocery bag at his side.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 1-3**

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Translation Notes and References

(1) (炬燵) A table with a heater attached underneath that is covered with a futon (quilt) to retain the heat.

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)[Next Page](#)**Volume 1****Chapter 1-4**

The floorboards creaked as Shinkuro climbed the stairs to the second floor. He came to a door with Room 5 written on its frosted glass window, then opened the door and went inside. After he put the groceries into his refrigerator, he took off his school uniform and changed into his everyday clothes. Then, he opened his windows fully so that fresh air would flow into the room. From the window, the red hues of the twilight shined in and as Shinkuro shielded his eyes, a brisk wind rushed into the room.

The apartment was a single room, eight tatami mats large (1). There was a small kitchen, but there was nothing but the bare essentials when it came to furniture. The few bits of furniture that existed were either gifts or items that were on sale. Shinkuro was far from materialistic and as such was not presently dissatisfied with his situation. If asked what he wanted, he would say only a space heater.

The trees and shrubs surrounding the apartment complex may have been purifying the air so that it lacked the smell of exhaust fumes. Shinkuro took in a deep breath of this clean air and slowly exhaled. He then prepared the table (which was both his dining table and his study table) and placed an abacus and his earnings for the day on top of it. He then placed his accounting book on the table as well. Even by the standards of the affluent, his financial state was at a place where he could not consider himself to be terribly poor. Shinkuro was probably fine with only being able to guarantee that he had the bare necessities. He had heard that one of the causes for social deterioration was the expanding disparity between the rich and poor. If there were people who casually bought cars that cost one hundred million yen (2), then there were also people who resorted to murder just to secure their next meal. There was no equality, but this much was obvious. Equality required everything to be the same. But others were different from oneself. One could never become like another person. It followed then that others could not become like oneself.

As Shinkuro used his abacus to determine whether he was in the red or not, someone knocked on his door. All of the rooms at May Rain Manor had insufficient locks, but when it came to the prevention of crime, it was an impenetrable fortress. Robbers, peddlers, periodical salesmen and religious solicitors coming to his door was not a possibility. This was a place not known by those unrelated to it. As such, only a few had any knowledge of it at all. A person visiting here was either an acquaintance of a tenant or someone who had business with a tenant.

Shinkuro placed his pencil inside his accounting book, then got up and headed for the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s me.”

The person said this in such a tone as if to state that it was not necessary to give a name. There were people that he allowed this with, but the number of people that he allowed such arrogance with were very few.

Shinkuro, a bit worried, opened his door and then suddenly stopped moving. He had already met this person long ago, but every time they met he looked at her in helpless fascination. She had a beautiful face that would make even

the best of models pale in comparison, and an outstanding figure as well. Under her trench coat that rested upon her shoulders, she wore a wine-red suit. The way that she held a cigarette in her mouth was just like the dignified look that one would expect of a young, female mafia boss who ruled the underworld. As he stared, she expressed a smile like that of a neighborhood bully; this was a peculiarity of hers.

Her name was Benika Juuzawa. No matter how hard a pubescent girl tried, they could never become like her, thought Shinkurou. He naturally lowered his head.

"It's been a while, Benika."

"You seem well."

They exchanged formal greetings, then as Benika bitterly smiled, she waved her hand.

Shinkurou showed Benika into his room, but gradually noticed something as she came in. Hidden within Benika's trench coat stood a small being.

It appeared to be a young girl who looked as if she was not even old enough to have entered grade school.

As soon as Benika came into the room, a person standing behind her removed her trench coat. Shinkurou's eyes widened as he watched this person neatly fold the trench coat.

"You were here, Yayoi?"

"Yes, I was here."

The person that had answered in so few words was Beniko's female subordinate, Yayoi Inuzuka. She was a young and beautiful woman. However, she left the impression that once you took your eyes off of her, she would disappear from your memory. One reason for this may have been because she was with the flashy Benika, but one could probably say that even without Benika there is hardly any indication that she would be noticed by anyone.

Shinkurou had once asked her about this, and he was told that it stemmed from her lineage being a long branch of ninjas. She did not have a playful personality, so it was probably true.

Yayoi, who remained behind Benika, held a single large suitcase in her hand.

As Shinkurou thought about how their visit today was probably linked to the suitcase, he started to boil some water in the kitchen. Because Yayoi did not eat or drink anything given to her by another person, he only prepared tea for three. He set everything on his table and sat straight up in seiza (3) position, waiting for Benika to speak.

After tasting her tea, Benika began to speak.

"Protect this girl for me."

Without any introduction, she went straight to the main point.

Shinkurou looked at the girl sitting next to Benika once more. For a moment, it seemed that he had lost his sense of reality.

The girl seemed like she had come straight from a picture book. She was just like the princes and princesses described in foreign fairy tales. She had every reason to be dressed in a magnificent dress. Naturally though, this was not the case. She had long hair, slender limbs, small lips, a modest gaze and white skin; everything about her was elegant, she seemed almost too refined. Even though Shinkurou did not have an interest in young girls, he was captivated by her ominous cuteness.

This girl, whose appearance rivaled Benika's, seemed exactly like the image of a princess who had been kidnapped

by a female thief.

Shinkurou pulled himself together and then looked back toward Benika.

“...In other words, this is a job request?”

“Yes.”

Benika said this in a very matter-of-fact manner, but Shinkurou’s pulse began to quicken. She was not just some ordinary acquaintance of his asking for this. She was his benefactor and senior.

Benika Juzawa was a dispute mediator, just like Shinkurou. One could say that she was the best in the world at her job. It was impossible to survive in the profession without knowing of her innumerable exploits. From the view of a novice like Shinkurou, she was no less than a heavenly being. This was a request from a woman like that. It was not unreasonable for him to get nervous about it.

As Shinkurou calmed down, he made his decision. Occasionally, there were times when Benika would be too busy with other jobs, so she would refer the job to a fellow tradesman. Of course, there was a limit to the number of people in which she could trust. Therefore, her coming here and telling him about the job made Shinkurou genuinely happy.

However, he still had questions regarding the details of the job.

First of all, who was this girl?

“This girl here is Murasaki Kuhouin. She’ll turn seven this year.”

Having sensed Shinkurou’s question, she introduced Murasaki.

Benika took her cigarette and put it out with the ashtray on the table. Then, as she took out a new one and placed it in her mouth, Yayoi reached out from behind her and lit the cigarette with a Zippo lighter.

As Shinkurou watched this, he questioned Benika more.

“...The Kuhouins?”

“Are there any others?”

So *it’s like that*. Shinkurou understood, and then he again looked at the girl.

There was only one household that called themselves the Kuhouins in this country. They were family of plutocrats whose assets are said to amount to a large portion of the world. Their name was distinguished among even the most distinguished of names.

This girl was a member of that kind of family.

Shinkurou noticed that he was being stared at. Murasaki then lifted her gaze off of him. She sat down in a well-mannered way, then calmly looked down. She opened her mouth, but said nothing.

“...I’m to protect her?”

“Yes.”

“From who?”

“I can’t say.”

"Why is she being targeted?"

"I can't say."

"Why me?"

"Because I think you're qualified."

"But, this is a request from the Kuhouin family, right? You would be so much better for—"

"I'm no good with kids."

"But..."

"Besides, it's safer here."

"Well, that may be... wait, hold on. Look after her in this room, really?"

"Is there a problem?"

"There probably is..."

Ignoring Shinkuro's bewilderment, Benika nonchalantly smoked her cigarette.

Without being told the circumstances, he was expected to guard this young girl. Moreover, she was a member of the Kuhouin family. Normally, he would not consider a suspicious request like this and would be blameless in refusing it. However, the fact was that the request came from Benika, a partner of his, which made it a different story altogether. Shinkuro respected Benika as a dispute mediator and felt an obligation to accept her request. He had to seriously consider it.

*This is kind of annoying...*

In order to delay his response, Shinkuro took his teacup, then got up and headed for the kitchen. He poured the remaining water from the kettle into his teacup and drank it all in one go. The sensation of the warm liquid passing through his throat made him widen his eyes as he savored it. His blood flow was invigorated, and until it reached his head, he felt a slight dizziness.

He tried to calmly consider everything.

This would be the first time he would act as a bodyguard. Looking at just him and the person he was guarding, it was easy to tell that it would be twice as difficult to protect her. Furthermore, in such a situation, he would always have to be on the defensive. He could not half-heartedly perform this task. The travel bag that Yayoi had brought was probably for Murasaki. If Shinkuro took the job, what would Benika think? How would he look after a child in this room?

Shinkuro came back to the table and sat down. Without giving a reply, he looked at the girl once more.

He unintentionally startled her.

For the first time, Murasaki raised her head and looked back at him.

Her young eyes were slightly wet with tears. Shinkuro became unable to take his eyes off of her pure radiance.



She was seven years old. Comparing himself to when he was about her age, he did not have a vast vocabulary. So when he wanted something, he was only able to express it with his eyes. *I want you to save me*, was too much for her to express in words, and so she only stared silently. *Let this be enough for him to understand. Please understand my feelings, please help me*, this is what he believed she was trying to say. These were the illusions of a child. Overall, it was a good decision. Shinkuro's family had accepted him. They always helped him. Shinkuro would never forget his gratitude for those times.

For now, this was the one thing that he could do.

"So what will you do, Shinkuro?"

"I'll take the job."

Hearing this, Benika smiled with satisfaction, and Murasaki, seemingly surprised, widened her eyes. When she saw Shinkuro silently nod his head, Murasaki lowered her head in embarrassment.

*Well, things are going to be difficult from now on...*

This would be the greatest challenge he had ever faced with his work. However, one does not become a dispute mediator and wish for a comfortable life. Moreover, for some reason he was glad to feel this way. This was probably because it felt righteous.

At that moment.

This was what Shinkuro believed.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 1-4**

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#### Translation Notes and References

(1) In Japan traditional style rooms (which are usually cheaper than western style rooms) there are tatami mats that cover the floors and the sizes of the rooms are usually denoted by the number of tatami mats they have.

(2) The U.S dollar amount it is about \$824,298 as of 3/10/15; though this should be viewed more as a million dollars in context.

(3) (正座) A formal way of sitting where one kneels with the tops of their feet flat on the floor while sitting on their soles.

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 1-5**

Shinkurou decided to escort Benika and Yayoi out while leaving Murasaki in his room.

The day had already come to an end, and everything was shrouded in darkness. The trees and shrubs surrounding May Rain Manor seemed larger than during the day and everything seemed to be more active, though it was likely just Shinkurou's own imagination.

As Shinkurou listened to sound of leaves rustling in the wind, he walked with Benika and Yayoi to the complex's gate.

"But really, why did you choose me for this?"

"Are you displeased?"

"No, that's not what..."

"Well, I tend to leave the important things to my intuition. This is not without reason. I have always been doing it this way, even up until today. As for this time, 'he'll probably be good for this, won't he?' is what I thought."

"...What do you mean by that?"

Benika's words may have had some sort of hidden meaning.

It felt a bit like she was expecting something other than him guarding Murasaki.

"I can't say."

Because she had a cigarette in her mouth, Benika broadly grinned as she laughed.

She had many secrets such as that. As expected, it was a questionable job.

Nevertheless, he accepted it and had no choice but to do his very best.

"Shinkurou, I expect a lot out of you. There is nothing more that I can do."

"Another one of your tricks?"

From beside the gate, hidden in the darkness, someone spoke these words. When Shinkurou turned toward the voice, he saw a red, luminous point. Then, from out of the darkness, as if seeping from within it, the figure of a person revealed itself. The red, luminous point was the end of a cigarette. The figure was in fact Yamie with a cigarette in her mouth. Her solid black attire made it seem as if she were merging with the darkness that spread out around her.

Had Benika noticed? She did not seem surprised by Yamie's sudden appearance.

"Gloomy as always, Yamie."

"Flashy as ever, Benika."

Shinkurou did not know all of the details, but these two were unusual, old acquaintances, and whenever they met face-to-face, they would exchange some degree of hostility. One could say that they were polar opposites. However, their beautiful figures and smoking habit were the two sole things they had in common.

"Benika, what's the story with your child?"

"What can I say? I was irresponsible."

"How pitiful."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The fact that you can be called a mother, it's just pitiful."

"Are you trying to pick a fight with me?"

They began calmly staring at each other and as usual, Shinkurou merely spectated. This time, however, he was curious about one thing.

"...Benika, you have a kid?"

"Yes."

She quickly answered him, but Shinkurou, who had aspired to be like her, was relatively shocked by this truth. Benika looked to be in her late twenties and Shinkurou knew nothing of her private life, but he never thought that she was a parent. They had known each other for a while, but this subject had never come up. He could not picture Benika as a mother at all. Could she raise a child? He had a lot of questions, but he also had to put an end to the insensitive air that was present at the moment.

"Well then, please get in touch with me later, Shinkurou. I still have to find a home nearby."

Shinkurou said yes and shook his head. Yamie then gave Benika a cold stare. Yamie held a cigarette in her black leather glove and pointed the tip of it at Benika.

"You are on your way to hell. I don't know how this all came about, but this boy has a future, so do not drag him into this."

"My intentions are good this time. It's not rare for me to do so."

Benika smiled bitterly, then as she blew out a puff of smoke, she spoke in a somewhat depressed voice.

"It's... an old promise."

Shinkurou was curious as to what she meant as he had not heard of this either. He had heard nothing from her and she had not answered any of his questions about her, except for things pertaining to her childhood. Even now, he would have to find the answer himself. If he could not find out, he would have to come to a conclusion based on what he actually did know. He considered how well he would be able to do this in comparison to an adult.

Shinkurou, who had seen off Benika and Yayoi, thought that he would tell Yamie about Murasaki, but he could not find her anywhere. It was as if she had assimilated into the darkness after finishing what she came for. The faint smell of tobacco was the only sign that she had been there at all.

As Shinkurou smelled it, he said, "Well, I suppose tomorrow is fine," and then returned to his room.

From now on, he would have a roommate. Moreover, she was a young girl.

What could be the best way to deal with a child who was like a princess? If someone were after her life, she would probably be uneasy. Should he treat her carefully, like some fragile object?

When Shinkurou returned to his room, Murasaki was sitting down in a formal manner, exactly as she had been before. Had she been waiting for Shinkurou?

Taking special care to use as gentle of a voice as possible, he greeted her.

"Let's try to get along from now on, okay?"

He reached his hand out, as if to stroke her head, but his hand was slapped away.

"Do not touch me so familiarly, commoner."

That was the first thing she had said all this time.

...Huh.

Murasaki stood up straight in front of Shinkurou, who was dumbfounded, and walked over to her travel bag. She then opened her bag and suddenly began taking off the dress she was wearing, though it seemed like she was having a bit of trouble doing so.

What could he say in that situation? Was what he heard before not just his imagination? Confused, he had such thoughts. Meanwhile, Murasaki had promptly finished changing her clothes. Was this the image of someone from a picture book? Murasaki, who was wearing a typical boy's T-shirt and shorts with a jacket over everything, lightly shook her head and after fixing her long hair, she finally faced Shinkurou. Where had the sweetness from before gone? Now, an impudent and prideful smile had surfaced upon her face.

"You, what is your name?"

"Huh?"

"Do you not understand Japanese? If you do, then answer. What is your name?"

"...Kurenai Shinkurou."

"I will remember it. So where is my room? Take me to it immediately."

"Here."

"What? Then, the sleeping quarters?"

"Here."

"The dining area?"

"Here."

"The living room?"

"Here."

"The bath?"

"There isn't one. But there is a bath house close by..."

Murasaki, who had finished with her brief questions, began to stomp around the floor on her toes, as if to show her heartfelt irritation, and then she looked around the room. Afterwards, she looked at Shinkurou, then around the room again, and then once more she stopped to look at Shinkurou.

"...Hmm, very well, very well. I understand what you mean. Do you think I am a child? Do you take me for some halfwit? There is no way a human would live in such a squalid room!"

This was something that the other tenants certainly could not be told.

Shinkurou, who was surrounded by a sight that seemed far from reality, looked over toward the dress that Murasaki had taken off and noticed a container of eye drops that had fallen over.

*Don't tell me that the tears and dress from earlier were... just an act?*

*Were they used to get me to take the job?*

*Then...*

"Hey! Are you going to say something? Commoner!"

As Shinkurou listened to Murasaki speak, he began to think, "*it seems you'll have women troubles*" was spot on.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 1-5**

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Translation Notes and References

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)[Next Page](#)**Volume 1****Chapter 2-1**

Chapter 2 – Under One Roof

Shinkuro was rather fond of the classroom early in the morning.

He passed through the nearly vacant shoe racks and corridors, heading for that quiet space ahead of him. In order to savor the fresh air that filled him with a refreshed feeling, Shinkuro always came to school early. Blending in with the students who were participating in early morning club activities, he passed through the school's gate, but was not the first to arrive at his classroom. Shinkuro opened the door to the classroom. Sitting at a desk with all the lights turned off was a solitary female student who was always there.

As expected, for this morning should be no exception, she was the first to come to Seiryou Academy's first year, class one classroom. And as expected, she sat in the room with none of the lights on. Except for the echoing sound of her fingers tapping on her laptop's keyboard, inside the dim room there was only silence.

Shinkuro turned on the lights, and after placing his bag on his seat, he spoke to the girl.

“Good morning.”

She had probably heard him, but she did not look up from her computer screen and instead continued to type. The laptop display reflected on her glasses which seemed to emphasize her indifference toward Shinkuro. While he gave a strained smile at her usual unsociability, Shinkuro sat down on the chair in front of her. Finally, she stopped typing and looked up.

“What?”

She glared through her thick glasses and looked at Shinkuro. This wasn't an expression of anger; she was simply nearsighted. No matter who the other person was, she looked at them in this same way. Shinkuro had already known her for more than ten years, but if this were the first time someone was meeting her, would this not make them feel uncomfortable and put them on edge?

Her name was Ginko Murakami. For better or worse, Shinkuro had known her from kindergarten up to high school. The two were what one would call childhood friends.

Shinkuro handed Ginko a plastic bag with sweet buns inside from a convenience store. He had bought it on his way to school, and sweet buns were about the only thing that she liked. In a very natural manner, she accepted the bag and then proceeded to take out one of her favorite sweet buns and tear the package open.

“If you have something to say, hurry up and say it.”

“I need some information about an incident from yesterday.”

Shinkuro was speaking to Ginko about the details of the stalker incident from yesterday. He received job request from her once she had taken them into consideration. Ginko looked back to her screen once again, but it appeared

that she was still listening to Shinkurou. The laptop was not the school's, but her own. Although this was not specifically against the rules, she had been warned several times by the teachers that it was a bit excessive to bring her laptop to school. However, Ginko never listened to this and gradually she was permitted to have it. It seemed that there was some sort of deal made behind the scenes, but Shinkurou was not well informed on the matter. Ginko had a reputation as the oddball of the classroom. Whenever someone addressed her, she would not reply; she was a schoolgirl who completely lacked any sort of cooperative spirit. She was a gloomy girl who would simply type on her laptop even if there was free time. Once, when a certain rumor about her spread, she was avoided by nearly everyone. That slowly went away though.

Shinkurou did not think of her as an oddball. This was probably because of how many true oddballs there were in today's society and because of his experience with them.

From the perspective of her childhood friend, Shinkurou did not believe that there was anyone more normal than Ginko.

"Are you stupid?"

This was the first thing she said after listening to what Shinkurou had said to her.

"What's pathetic is that I didn't do a thorough job."

She came to the conclusion that he had reduced his fee by half and seemed exceedingly displeased.

"The things you owe, you pay, and the things you receive, you take. That is the professional way to do things."

"No, but—"

"When a woman is speaking, just be silent and listen!"

Ginko said this in a thundering voice, and Shinkurou shut his mouth.

Ever since kindergarten, she had known that this was Shinkurou's greatest weakness.

*Why would knowing about my younger self be embarrassing?*

*Is it because I was so frank about everything at that time?*

As Shinkurou thought about this in the recesses of his mind, he listened to Ginko's preaching.

"By reducing the fee, it's proof that you don't have confidence in your work. Who would have faith in a professional who seems like they'll easily lower their prices?"

She had a very sound argument and Shinkurou could not make an objection. It was a simple argument, but he was hardly ever able to win against Ginko. Ever since long ago, she had been superior when it came to information and thinking.

As she stared at Shinkurou, Ginko began to nibble on her second sweet bun. Sweet buns were her absolute favorite food and she ate them often, but unexpectedly, she was the thinnest person in their class. It seemed like she was somewhat disappointed in her meager proportions and so she recently began increasing the amount of food that she ate. And yet she did so without gaining any weight. It was probably just the nature of her body.

"My main point is that you were mistaken from the start when someone like you began doing something like dispute mediation."

"This again..."

As Shinkurou began getting a bit irritated, he stared at Ginko and shut his mouth. Ever since he had begun his work, Ginko had been opposed to it and she was probably still waiting for the moment when he would be willing to discuss changing his mind.

Once it seemed that Ginko was satisfied and finished saying all that she wanted to say, she turned back to her computer screen. As she nibbled on a sweet bun, her fingers gracefully danced on her keyboard. Although her fingers moved so much, she was very poor when it came to exercise and such things, but Shinkuroou thought that this was one of her few charms.

"Ginko, I have a bit of a favor to ask you. Is that okay?"

"Is it a job request?"

"I would like you to gather some information—about the Kuhouins. The only information I need are a few things that will clear up some stuff I'm uncertain about."

As Benika had not made him well informed of the aforementioned, it was necessary for him to investigate it.

Ginko stopped typing, and seeming puzzled, she stared at Shinkuroou.

"...Kuhouins?"

The Kuhouins, who were a large plutocratic family, and Shinkuroou; there was no way the two could be connected.

Shinkuroou briefly explained the situation. To make sure that she understood when he spoke of how he was requested to guard someone apparently from the Kuhouin family, he stopped speaking in an ambiguous manner. He had confidence in Ginko's abilities. She was a professional information broker and would not give him any substandard information.

Ginko Murakami, a high school girl and also an information broker. Moreover, she was the second generation to have done it. Her grandfather, Ginji Murakami, was a resourceful information broker who secretly maneuvered through the economic bubble<sup>1</sup> and the pre- and post-war times. All of his personal connections had since been passed down to his granddaughter. But then one might ask, why is she the second generation rather than the third? Originally, the one who would be expected to have inherited this would have been Ginko's father, but this did not happen because he married the only daughter of a ramen shop.

"That's strange."

Ginko, who had listened to Shinkuroou's story, did not seem to completely believe it.

"Why?"

"Don't they have their own private guard for that?"

He had not previously thought about the existence of what Ginko said, but the Kuhouins were more than capable of gathering guards. This seemed like something that the family guards would be able to completely handle. They only needed to be permitted to have firearms and they would have greater war potential than the Self-Defense Force<sup>2</sup>.

"Doesn't it seem like something out of a manga?"

When it came to employed forces, as one would expect from one of the world's foremost plutocrats, they were on a different scale.

As Shinkurou admired this fact he came to a decision.

Ginko's information was never wrong. They probably did have a private guard. If that were the case, then Murasaki, who was a member of the family, should have her own personal guard. It was rather strange. It was unnatural.

"Who did you get this job from?"

"Benika."

"...Ah, that person."

All it took was that for her to frown in discomfort. She did not have a good impression of Benika. It was an occupational disease. In this case, it was solely the rumors Ginko had heard that had caused Benika to earn Ginko's contempt. It was not as if Benika would be without unfavorable criticism. Though there were fewer good rumors than bad; the underworld and the entertainment world were the same in this respect.

Ginko took some milk from out of a paper bag and after taking one sip, she spoke.

"Seriously, if you associate with that kind of person, you'll get your due reward you know."

"Is that so?"

"A good death while incarcerated. If you're unlucky, you will be shot to death, or burned to death, or eaten to death, or chopped into tiny pieces, or tortured until your spirit is broken, or..."

"...I don't like any of those."

"Anyway, forget what I said before. Refuse that job. It is way too fishy. Normally, no one would take a job like that. However, you're an idiot among other things. Seriously, think it over and then act upon it, okay. Got that?"

He hadn't told her that he had already taken the job.

*I knew it, this was a big mistake...*

As Shinkurou nodded his head uncertainly to show that he had heard Ginko, he thought about what had happened yesterday.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 2-1**

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#### Translation Notes and References

1) After WWII Japan experienced rapid economic growth, which reached its pinnacle between 1989 and 1991, though it ultimately resulted in one of the worst economic depressions in the country due to over speculation of land.

2) Japan is not allowed to have a standing army due to constitutional restrictions. Therefore instead they have the Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF) which can not partake in acts of aggression.

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)[Next Page](#)**Volume 1****Chapter 2-2**

Yesterday, even after everything was settled, taking care of Muasaki had been a real hassle.

What Benika said, deliberately making Murasaki wear that dress, everything was done so that Shinkurou would accept the job. True to Benika's reputation, she told Murasaki to use eye drops to fake her tears as well.

Shinkurou, standing with the small space that acted as the kitchen behind him, asked Murasaki, "You put these in your eyes, didn't you?" Once she heard that, a look of astonishment formed on her face. Shinkurou's expression was one that said "*You're rather simple, aren't you?*" Murasaki cast her eyes downwards in order to avoid his sneer.

From the way her shoulder tensed up, Murasaki was obviously displeased. From beside Murasaki's grumbling self, Shinkurou pat her head. Everything had been set up by Benika. It was now too late to refuse the job. While thinking that, Shinkurou tried to explain the existence of six-tatami sized rooms to Murasaki, who had been incessantly complaining about it. Before long, Murasaki understood, and said—

"So commoners are able to live in such a cramped space..."

—as if she were experiencing culture shock. Shinkurou finally began to understand how reckless he was to have agreed to take care of this child. However, it was too late to regret his choice.

Once again, Shinkurou introduced himself to his new roommate.

"I'm Shinkurou Kurenai. Let's try to get along, Murasaki-chan<sup>1</sup>"

"Stop using *-chan*, it is weird."

Her response lacked any charm whatsoever.

Proudly folding her arms across her chest, Murasaki said,

"My name is Murasaki Kuhouin. I have already told you this, but just because I am a child, do not think that you can take me lightly. First of all, I am a Kuhouin. Being from such a family, I am different from everyone else. Do you understand?"

Shinkurou did not agree with what she said, but since she did not seem finished, he just nodded.

Seemingly satisfied, Murasaki continued.

"I am only seven years old. However, I have already mastered *hiragana* and *katakana*<sup>2</sup>. And I am somewhat good with difficult kanji. Ah, I get it! Since I am a young girl, you naturally think that I lack intelligence. Let me demonstrate."

Murasaki held out her hand. When Shinkurou looked at the palm of her small hand, she became irritated and began to wave her hand up and down. He assumed that she wanted something to write with, so he handed her a memo

pad and a pencil. Unexpectedly, Murasaki moved her pencil with elegance.

"There, just like that."

"Ahem," said Murasaki as she proudly threw out her chest. "*Murasaki Kuhouin*" was written on the memo pad. Shinkurou saw a subtle mistake on one of the more difficult characters for *Kuhouin*, but he pretended not to see it and applauded.

"Hehe," beamed Murasaki, filled with joy. She probably was only able to do this thanks to a considerable amount of practice.

*No matter how you look at her, she's just a child.*

"Umm, so..."

Shinkurou tried to say something but hesitated. Murasaki then said,

"It is fine to address me without any honorifics."

She was definitely an *ojou-sama*<sup>3</sup>, but because Shinkurou thought about what it would mean to call her that, he was a little reluctant to use the honorific. Murasaki bowed her head to show her good will.

"Why, I really am touched. You're a very big-hearted person."

"Ah, is that so... Since I do not discriminate against commoners, I will be kind to you, my servant, as well."

"Thanks for that..."

"Now, Shinkurou, I am tired. Get the preparations in order."

Did she mean, *get the bed prepared?*

When Shinkurou thought about how things would be like from now on, he became a little depressed. However, Shinkurou obeyed her wish. As he did not have a guest futon, Shinkurou took his own futon out from the closet and laid it on the tatami. When he turned around and saw Murasaki, he was taken aback. Contrary to what he thought she would do, which was to start rummaging through her bag and change into her pajamas, Murasaki was stark naked.

"Huh? Why are you making that doltish face?"

Murasaki stared suspiciously at Shinkurou, who stood with his mouth gaping. After taking a deep breath, Shinkurou asked her why she had stripped and Murasaki replied that she had always slept like this at home. When he checked her bag to see if there were she had any pajamas, he found nothing.

If one considered the general view towards sleeping naked, it didn't seem that absurd. Shinkurou came to realize this and kindly explained the typical manner of sleeping to Murasaki. However, she was not at all surprised or embarrassed, but rather regained her previous dignified attitude.

Shinkurou did not care much for Murasaki; his taste was more inclined towards women who were fully mature in both mind and body. Shinkurou did not feel that Murasaki's body, which had yet to develop around the chest area, had any healthy beauty. He was not interested in her at all. However, Shinkurou averting his eyes in embarrassment was not the only thing bothering Murasaki.

"Am I supposed to sleep on the floor?"

Murasaki, who had never slept on anything but a bed, was once again hit with what seemed like culture shock. However, with an arrogant “Well, I will permit it”, she laid down on the futon after elegantly covering her mouth and letting out a yawn. After commanding Shinkurou to turn off the lights, Shinkurou was able to hear her relaxed breathing in no time.

Shinkurou truly admired Murasaki’s courage. It was her first time being in this room, her first time meeting Shinkurou, yet she was still able to naturally flutter about. Shinkurou at her age paled in comparison to her. Shinkurou went to where he would sleep as he recalled how he was not able to sleep when his mother or older sister was around. Was Murasaki really that tired?

The next morning, Shinkurou snuck out of the room and went to school.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 2-2**

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#### Translation Notes and References

(1) (ちゃん) An honorific put at the end of names, usually of small children, to give an endearing tone.

(2) Hiragana and Katakana are the two Japanese syllabaries used in conjunction with kanji, Chinese characters, to spell words or used alone to show the phonetic spelling of kanji. Katakana is most often used for words of foreign origin.

(3) (お嬢様) A term used for daughters of rich or powerful families.

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 2-3**

*All things considered, I slept really well...*

*Why am I so tired, though? Was it because of all the problems I had on my way back to May Rain Manor?*

*Is there some underlying cause?*

Shinkuro thought about these things as Ginko continued her story.

“Beat irrational violence with more irrational violence. That’s how Benika Juuzawa’s operates. Stay as far away as her as possible because you will encounter misfortune if you associate with her. Especially since you are an idiot and easily manipulated”

“No, even if I were manipulated to do something...”

“Idiots have idiotic ways of making things work. I will gather the information on the Kuhouins for you for now but seriously, listen to my advice. You’ll need it since you’re such an idiot.”

“Yeah, got it.”

“And just so you know...”

Ginko wanted to say something but when another student entered the classroom, she went back to her work. Shinkuro did not particularly mind. Ginko had once said that it was best that they did not seem to close to others. Being seen too close to each other could be troublesome for the both of them.

Shinkuro returned to his own seat.

There are a lot of things he had to ask Murasaki later.

It felt good to have something to do.

He felt a bit guilty for not taking what Ginko had said earlier into consideration.

Shinkuro let out a big yawn and decided to start paying attention to his first lesson of the day.

Murasaki, who had been waiting for Shinkuro to come home, wore a sullen expression on her face.

“Are you going to give me an explanation?”

Murasaki said that she had been sleeping until the afternoon. When she woke up, she found no one in the room. Since she still did not know anything about her surroundings, it looked like she wandered around inside the apartment complex while reluctantly eating the sweet buns and some other foodstuffs that Shinkuro left for her. Shinkuro thought that she was angry because she was bored. However, she was apparently angry because he had not been at home.

"You abandoned me. Why did you go out by yourself? Why?"

"No... I... I had school, it was because I had school..."

Shinkurou had mentioned that he could not be with Murasaki round the clock and Benika did not seem to mind when she gave him the job. Despite having accepted this potentially deadly job, everything would be fine if Murasaki stayed put in May Rain Manor. Murasaki would be completely safe here. Even if someone were to come in and assassinate Shinkurou, Murasaki's safety here would be guaranteed.

Shinkurou decided to try explaining this to Murasaki. However, since she was just a young child, Shinkurou thought about the best way to explain this to her. While Shinkurou was considering his options, Murasaki tilted her head.

"...School? Is that not the place where people of the same age gather to study?"

"That's true but..."

*That was a strange response*, thought Shinkurou. Suddenly, he realized what the problem was. Murasaki was seven years old. If she were a normal girl she would be in first grade. What could be done about her schooling?

"Murasaki, you don't go to school?"

"No. It is unnecessary."

"Unnecessary?"

"I heard that this 'school' is a place where one studies and at the same time, prepares for a job."

"Well, I suppose that's true."

"If that's the case, this 'school' is obviously unnecessary for me."

Murasaki said this decisively. However, she continued with a bit of reluctance.

"...I am a little curious though."

It seemed likely that a member of the Kuhouin family would go to the best private school there is but this was just what Shinkurou thought. The reality of the situation was probably much more complex.

"I understand. I will not bother about your schooling since it cannot be helped."

Murasaki nodded her head as if she was a generous master. She had decided that Shinkurou was her hired servant and he had no choice but to be quiet and listen to what she had to say.

"Shinkurou, I want to take a bath. Take me."

Since she was too tired yesterday, she went to bed without taking a bath. Thus, it seemed that she wanted to take one today.

Shinkurou still had many things to ask her. However, Shinkurou put two towels in a wash basin and led Murasaki out of the May Rain Manor. Their destination was a bathhouse that was a mere three minute walk away. Throughout the short walk there, Murasaki turned her curiosity-filled gaze towards everything that she saw. When she saw smoke rising from the chimney of the bathhouse, she began to 'ooh' and 'aah' in amazement.

"Oh, do commoners bathe here? It must be rather disagreeable to have to make a trip specifically for bathing."

"...Not everyone uses these baths you know?"

As soon as Shinkurou corrected Murasaki, he realized something very important. At the bathhouse he was taking her to, men and women bathed separately. Since this was the case they would have to be separated. How would he guard her if they were separated? Though this bathhouse was only used by people who lived nearby, he could not say for sure that Murasaki would not encounter any suspicious people. What should he do?

Not caring about trivial things such as what Shinkurou's was worrying about, Murasaki ran off towards the bathhouse.

She was heading towards the men's bath.

Shinkurou chased after her, flustered. After passing under the curtain at the entrance, he saw Murasaki talking to an old man sitting at the attendant's booth.

"Are you alone, little girl?"

"No, I am here with my servant."

"Your servant?"

The old man at the booth looked suspiciously at Shinkurou who had rushed in after Murasaki. As a faint smile returned to the old man's face, Shinkurou asked whether he could bring Murasaki into the men's bath and was told that there was no problem as long as she was under ten. While thinking about the ridiculousness of this criterion, Shinkurou paid the fee for two and brought Murasaki into the dressing room. Despite being around and undressing near so many people for what probably was her first time, Murasaki did not seem to particularly care as she undressed. After undressing, she headed towards the bath without waiting for Shinkurou. Shinkurou chased after her while tying a towel around his waist. Shinkurou tried to offer Murasaki a towel as well but was rejected with her reply of "*It is unnecessary.*". Her attitude towards his offer was as if she was trying to say "*What is there to cover?*". Shinkurou, who wore a towel, even began to think that he may be seen as an indecent person. He had heard from Ginko once before that real upper class people, like royalty, do not believe that their nakedness can be perceived by lower class people. To them, they were distinct from the lower class people. "*Therefore, they feel no shame,*" was what Ginko had concluded. Murasaki's attitude may be because of that. Or maybe it was just because she was still so young.

When Murasaki took one step inside the bath, her eyes were completely filled with awe. Was the idea of this many people bathing together in one large bath completely new to her? Since it seemed like she would stare forever if Shinkurou left her alone, Shinkurou grabbed Murasaki's hand and sat her down at a washing station.

Murasaki, who sat next to Shinkurou, arrogantly commanded him.

"If you will."

It seemed that it was normal for servants to wash their masters in the Kuhouin family. She hated it when Shinkurou touched her, so how exactly were these two situations different? Instead of ignoring her, Shinkurou reluctantly obeyed just because his older sister had bathed him when he was younger as well.

"I'll wash your back but you'll have to wash everything else by yourself."

"Why is that?"

Murasaki gave him a stare that said "*Can you not do even that?*"

*She's just a child, I have to be patient* ran through Shinkurou's mind as he pointed to a family which had also come to bathe. The children, who were the same age as Murasaki, could serve as a guide as to how Murasaki should wash herself. Murasaki did not really seem to understand but she nodded while letting out a sigh.

“...Very well. If you say you cannot do it then I will not ask the impossible of you. That would be harsh and it is not my intention to treat my servants as such. I shall be tolerant.”

“Now, wash my back,” commanded Murasaki as she turned her back towards Shinkuro.

While thinking that maybe Murasaki wasn’t that bad after all, Shinkuro took out some soap and began scrubbing her back. He stopped after scrubbing just once. Even for a child, her white skin just seemed to be excessively smooth. Water droplets flowed down her skin without any resistance whatsoever. It probably was the kind of skin that all women desperately tried to get.

In contrast, Shinkuro’s skin was covered with small wounds. As he witnessed the difference in their skin, a bitter smile rose upon his face.

Was this difference because of how they grew up?

After he finished washing Murasaki’s back, Shinkuro handed her a towel. Murasaki, who seemed to have never washed herself, learned to do so by imitating Shinkuro. She washed herself well but once it came to washing her hair she could no longer do it by herself.

“Hey, what is this?! It’s stinging my eyes!”

Shinkuro thought that it was normal for shampoo to burn one’s eyes. However, it seemed that the shampoo the Kuhouins used was different. They probably used shampoo made specifically for children. This one hundred and twenty yen shampoo will never be able to replicate the same results. As Shinkuro washed the shampoo out of Murasaki’s hair and tried to lift her spirits, he began thinking to himself.

*Will I have to do things like this every day from now on?*

Shinkuro became a little depressed.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**  
**Chapter 2-3**

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Translation Notes and References

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)[Next Page](#)**Volume 1****Chapter 2-4**

Murasaki, who seemed like she could not handle the heat of the bath water, got out of the bath after only thirty seconds. After leaving without Shinkuro, she went to the changing room. Despite wanting to stay a little longer, Shinkuro chased after Murasaki.

Murasaki commented that she liked the bath but that she had simply grown tired of how noisy it was. As Shinkuro left for the changing room, he thought about how he was probably nothing but trouble for his parents and older sister when he was younger. Once he got there, Murasaki was holding something while dressed in her underwear. It was a bottle of coffee milk that was sold at a nearby shop. When Shinkuro asked her where she got it from, Murasaki replied, "That man gave it to me." She pointed toward an elderly man sitting on a massage chair. The man looked at her with a friendly smile. Shinkuro recognized him as the owner of the neighborhood liquor store located in the shopping district. Shinkuro was somewhat acquainted with him as whenever there was a party at May Rain Manor, he would visit the local shops for supplies. Shinkuro bowed to the shop owner and he raised a hand in response. He was fond of children but even more so, he was the coach of the boys' baseball team and was thus well known within the community. There was little doubt that he was the one who gave Murasaki the coffee milk.

"Did you properly thank him?"

"Thank him? Why would I?"

Murasaki looked at Shinkuro, puzzled as she held the bottle of milk with both hands and started drinking it.

"He only gave something to me. Nothing more."

Shinkuro made a fist and lightly struck Murasaki on her head.

"Ow!"

Murasaki held her head with both hands and crouched down. At that instant, Shinkuro caught hold of her bottle of coffee milk as it fell. More than ten seconds passed before Murasaki lifted her head. Her expression seemed to tell Shinkuro that she could not believe what had just happened to her as tears began to well in her eyes.

"Y...You hit me! With your fist! Your fist!"

Shinkuro struck her head once more.

"A...again!"

Shinkuro then spoke to Murasaki, who held her head and protested with teary eyes.

"If someone does something nice for you, you must properly thank him. It's common courtesy and even if you're just a kid, you must still do it."

After saying this Shinkuro realized something.

*Wasn't I told this a lot when I was younger?*

*Has the day for me to be scolding someone about manners really come so fast?*

Shinkuro started to worry that he may have gone too far when he realized that Murasaki remained silent but his needless worry quickly dissipated. Surprisingly, Murasaki regained her calm and closed her eyes as if she was contemplating what Shinkuro had said earlier. After a while, she nodded her head.

"I see, what you said is correct. I was at fault."

Shinkuro was taken aback by her frank words. Murasaki then went on to say,

"I am sorry. Please forgive me."

"Ah, it's nothing..."

Shinkuro, too embarrassed to reply, remained still as Murasaki went over to the liquor store owner and gave him her thanks. The shop owner smiled and pat Murasaki on her head with his large hands. Murasaki returned to Shinkuro, who was surprised at Murasaki's actions. Once Murasaki had finished getting dressed, she turned towards Shinkuro to say something.

"Well, let us get going."

Without waiting for his reply, Murasaki headed for the exit.

Shinkuro, still confused, dressed himself quickly and chased after her while holding their washbasins.

*Somehow all I seem to do is to chase after her* thought Shinkuro as he left the bathhouse.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 2-4**

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Translation Notes and References

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)[Next Page](#)**Volume 1****Chapter 2-5**

After returning home, Shinkuro decided to start preparing dinner. When Shinkuro asked Murasaki to watch television while waiting, she merely tilted her head in confusion, as if she did not know how to turn it on. Once Shinkuro pressed the switch at the bottom of the television, Murasaki exclaimed, “Oh!”

“This is my first time encountering a television that does not use a remote control. It is quite the novelty.”

*She must be being sarcastic,* thought Shinkuro. However, since she was of the Kuhouin family, who probably had the latest television models with large screens, an old-style television that had been salvaged from the garbage dump would probably seem like something new. Shinkuro taught Murasaki how to turn the knobs to change channels and left her to her own devices. Murasaki immediately began to flip through the channels curiously, the knob making a clicking sound as she did so, until she ultimately decided on watching an anime.

Shinkuro took out some ingredients from the refrigerator and began to prepare dinner. May Rain Manor, despite being such an old building, was very well made and the heat from the stove was more than adequate for cooking. Shinkuro put some oil into a wok, then added some chilled rice he had prepared earlier. As he separated the rice grains he added eggs, minced green onions, and a little diced pork. He tossed the wok with one hand to complete their fried rice before setting it onto plates. Just as Shinkuro set the plates on the table, someone knocked on the door. Knowing that Murasaki was not going to leave the television, Shinkuro turned off the stove and went to answer the door.

“Who is it?”

“Hello!”

On the other side of the door stood Tamaki Mutou, showing a carefree smile. She lived in room number six and was a university student – or so she said. However, since Shinkuro had never actually seen her leave for school, he wasn’t sure if that was actually true. If one were to closely examine her, it would be apparent that she was a true beauty. Yet, she was the kind of woman who lacked any sort of femininity and carelessly tied back her disheveled hair with an elastic band. She dressed from top to bottom in a jersey outfit and wore *geta*<sup>1</sup>. She was a complete mess. She was also a heavy drinker and had horrible behavior while intoxicated. Sometimes, when she was completely inebriated, she would sleep in the hallway and could easily be mistaken for a homeless person.

If the most charming tenant at May Rain Manor was Yamie, the most boisterous tenant would definitely be Tamaki.

“What is it, Tamaki?”

“Let me borrow some soy sauce.”

This was such a common occurrence that Shinkuro handed her a bottle of soy sauce without questioning her.

“Oh, let me have some salt, too.”

He handed her some salt.

"While you're at it, some miso, too."

He handed her some miso.

"In that case, some rice, too."

He handed her some rice.

"You know what, how about the rice cooker, too?"

"Is that all?!"

"No, that's not everything. See, it's because I have to prepare the side dishes myself. ...Ah, the *side dishes*<sup>2</sup> part probably made you have some perverted thoughts, didn't it? Well, aren't you indecent?"

Tamaki burst into laughter while saying, "I'm trying to collect men who live alone." *Her only bad point seemed to be her terrible drinking habits but she is also a little annoying*, thought Shinkuro. However, to make things worse, she also really liked to make dirty jokes.

When Shinkuro first moved into May Rain Manor, Tamaki had said, "Here, have a housewarming present!" as she handed him a large quantity of adult movies. It left Shinkuro at a loss for how to react.

As Shinkuro thought about how he could send Tamaki away, she looked around his room until her gaze rested upon Murasaki, who was sitting in front of the television.

"Whoa, who's that kid? She's insanely beautiful."

Without having time to say anything, Murasaki had gotten up and crouched in front of Shinkuro.

"What's your name, young lady?"

"Murasaki Kuhouin."

"Aww, the way she speaks is cute, too!"

Tamaki rubbed Murasaki's head and then began to touch her face and body. Surprisingly, Murasaki did not resist. Previously, Murasaki made a face like an annoyed kitten every time someone tried to do this to her. By doing this, Tamaki had become a bit like a mother. As Shinkuro watched this, he thought about how she had let people like the liquor store owner and Tamaki touch her despite brushing Shinkuro's hand aside when he tried. He wondered why that was.

"I'm Tamaki Mutou from room six. I'm Shinkuro's sex-friend."

"Secsfriend?"

"Don't tell her such lies!"

Tamaki ignored Shinkuro's protest and remained entranced with fondling Murasaki's soft cheeks.

"Ah, this feeling is pure bliss... So, Shinkuro, why do you have this kid? Is she your little sister?"

"...Didn't you just hear her name?"

"Ah, I see, I see. Weeell, is she yours then?"

Tamaki lifted her left pinky up while a complacent and lewd smile grew upon her face.

"I'm not sure if it's spacious enough for me to protect her here. Don't bother visiting my dojo anymore. There are a lot of cute children there. In particular, Madoka and Hikari have pretty promising futures. If you were to make a pass on one of them..."

"Please go home already."

"Don't wanna..."

Shinkuro gave Tamaki a plate of fried rice, who was trying desperately not to leave. She was an annoying, noisy person but Shinkuro did not dislike her. In fact, he respected her. Tamaki smiled and accepted the plate.

"Thanks. So, are you really taking care of that kid?"

"It's for work."

"I see," was all that Tamaki said and inquired no further. That was how things worked here at May Rain Manor.

"Since I have an abundance of life knowledge, if you have anything to ask about sex troubles, sex worries or sex problems then we'll have a nice long chat about it, okay?"

"I definitely will not be doing that."

"Do you need a condom?"

"...Are you serious? Please just leave already."

Shinkuro pointed towards the door and Tamaki left the room with an increasingly reluctant look on her face.

Shinkuro heaved a sigh of relief and served Murasaki and himself a plate of fried rice each. It was finally dinnertime. Murasaki ate vigorously due to her hunger and stopped eating once she seemed satisfied.

"The ingredients were meager. However, there was no problem with the flavor."

Murasaki commented on the meal while Shinkuro finished his food.

It was now time for bed. Only now did Shinkuro remember the problem regarding the lack of futons.

Because Shinkuro was not one to stay up late, he did not mind going to sleep earlier than usual. But despite there being two people living here now, there was still only one futon. Yesterday, Shinkuro gave the futon to Murasaki and he slept on the floor. However, if he continued to do so, every night would definitely be painful. *If I had thought about this earlier I could have tried to borrow a futon from Tamaki*, thought Shinkuro. But then when Shinkuro remembered the disastrous scene that was her room, which was always overflowing with DVDs and manga, he started becoming afraid of what kind of futon he would have received if he had asked Tamaki for one.

Murasaki, who had already brushed her teeth, got into the futon and looked up at Shinkuro.

"Why are you just standing there idly?"

"...Nothing in particular."

"Is that so..."

Without giving him too much thought, Murasaki said, "Hurry up and turn the lights off" and closed her eyes. When she first came here, all she did was to complain but once she grew to understand her circumstances, it seems like

she was able to accept them. Her adaptability was amazing. If she were from the Kuhouin family, shouldn't she be highly annoyed about her current circumstances?

Shinkurou put the books that he would need the next day in his bag and lay down on the tatami after switching off the sole light source in the room. The cold temperatures in the room was not unbearable but if you were to ask him, Shinkurou would have liked to have a heater. *Maybe I should try searching for one in the garbage dump when I have the time. More importantly, I need to go buy a futon tomorrow. A cheap one would be nice.*

As Shinkurou thought about how dark the room was and how the only source of illumination was the starlight streaming in through the window, he sensed Murasaki moving about restlessly. Shinkurou rubbed her head.

Shinkurou had only touched her lightly but when he remembered that she was just a seven-year-old girl, he became a little worried. He decided to call out to her when she replied in a weak voice:

“...Shinkurou, I am not afraid of you.”

“Huh?”

“It hurt but I am not afraid of you. Despite it being painful, I was not afraid. It was the first time that something like that had happened to me. However, fear and pain do not always come hand in hand.”

Murasaki rubbed the spot where Shinkurou had hit her with a curious look on her face.

“Does it still hurt? About what happened earlier—”

“Do not apologize.”

Shinkurou decided to continue apologizing despite what she said but Murasaki interrupted him.

“What you said was right. You did what you did in order to teach me something. Therefore, do not apologize. Thoughtlessly apologizing will only make what you have been trying to convey lose its meaning.”

“...I suppose that's true.”

“If there is anything else I am unaware of, please do teach me. I wish to learn.”

“I understand,” said Shinkurou, astonished by her ability to accept his viewpoint.

*Are these the kind of people prestigious families like the Kuhouin give birth to?*

*It's like we are of the same age, despite her spending every day fooling around childishly.*

*However, why would a girl with such a thirst for knowledge not attend school?*

*Does this have something to do with the family's internal politics?*

“Shinkurou, I apologize for the suddenness but there is something that I want you to teach me.”

“Go ahead and ask.”

“What is a ‘secsfriend’?”

“...You don't need to know that.”

“Is that so? Then what is a condom?”

"Go to sleep already."

The reoccurring fits kept coming.

*Dead. Everyone is dead. So many of them are dead. The sensation of my sister's hand grasping mine is no more. I can't hear my mother's voice. I can't see my father. Everything around me is blanketed in darkness. I don't know if I can open my eyes. My head hurts. My face is slimy. The inside of my body is slimy. Something made them this way. I feel heavy. Something that I can't see is on top of my body. I just need to focus on taking one more breath. I lose my focus and I become stifled. I try to say something, yet the pain in my throat will not allow me to. What is this? What is this? Why has it come to this? Someone help. Someone save me. Please. Save me.*

However, his wish would reach no one.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 2-5**

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#### Translation Notes and References

- 1) Geta (下駄) A type of tradition Japanese wooden shoes which are typically worn with kimono.
- 2) The original Japanese word 'okazu' (オカズ) can mean either side dish or refer to what is used to aid one's sexual fantasies.

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)[Next Page](#)**Volume 1****Chapter 2-6**

Shinkuro, who had woken up, looked at the morning sun, which shone in through the window, and let out a sigh of relief. He wiped his forehead, which was moist with sweat, and took several deep breaths.

*It's okay, I'm alive.*

*I'm breathing normally, I can move my limbs and I can see.*

Shinkuro clenched his hands several times and as gently released them he looked around, then noticing the lone small child wrapped in a futon. Murasaki was curled up like a fetus; she looked just like a newborn angle. She did not know of the depravity of the world; her sleeping face was too pure. Shinkuro stretched out his hand and then lightly pinched the tip of Murasaki's small nose. It was pleasant to watch her fret over this; thus Shinkuro was able to clear away the dark things that had taken hold of his heart. It seemed strange that he was living in the same room with this young child.

Murasaki had said that someone was after her. If this person were someone from the Kuhouin family then the reasons could have probably been limitless. To an organization that specialized in kidnapping for profit she would be an ideal target. However, why would Benika entrust Murasaki with Shinkuro? Certainly May Rain Manor was an exceptionally safe place but Shinkuro could not understand Benika's reasoning behind having him protect her. He had gotten the part about guarding from what he had heard from Ginko; overall he was not able to make sense of the situation.

"...Well Whatever"

Shinkuro opened his window and the cold wind glided over him, further waking him up.

In the end, what will be will be.

At that time he was in the midst of despair and even now he lives that way.

Shinkuro, while on his way back from school, thought about what he would do that evening and decided to do some shopping. It had been suggested to Shinkuro that he throw a welcome party for Murasaki and thus it was for that reason that he was going out to shop. Murasaki also wished to go and so Shinkuro allowed her to accompany him. With the exception of the time that Shinkuro took her to the bathhouse, Murasaki had not left May Rain Manor so Shinkuro figured that it was probably necessary for her to take a walk. Shinkuro led Murasaki out and the two went to town. Being discreet, Shinkuro carefully observed their surroundings and the two steadily advanced at their own pace. As they walked it seemed that everything was new for Murasaki. If she were from the Kuhouin family it was probably standard practice for her to be chauffeured everywhere, so she probably had never walked anywhere.

Murasaki moved around filled with curiosity and as if to confirm her own knowledge she would ask Shinkuro about the various things that they passed by. Where could Murasaki, who did not go to school, learn all of these things? Did the Kuhouin family have their own system of education? Shinkuro chased after Murasaki, who had wandered off and lead her to the shopping district.

When the two arrived at the supermarket and went to the second floor, Shinkuro found a futon that was on sale and bought it.

"So the common masses handle coins and paper money with their bare hands... Their hands must become rather filthy. Is it not more convenient to use a credit card."

As Shinkuro paid for the futon at the register, Murasaki looked at him and expressed her feelings on the matter. Without showing any interest in the meat and vegetables, Murasaki stopped right in front of the confection stand however there were several kids about her age there happily deciding what they would get; Murasaki glanced at them then said, "Humph, you all are a bunch of children" over their shoulders and then preceded to leave. Without waiting to see the luggage that Shinkuro was showing her, Murasaki left the rest to him and abandoned his side.

Shinkuro was not angry that Murasaki was taking thing at her own pace; could this have been because he found something amusing about observing her behavior, which was anything but bashful? There was nothing about her that Shinkuro did not find strangely amusing.

Shinkuro and Murasaki had left the supermarket and Murasaki, who was at Shinkuro's side, found herself staring at something that had caught her interest. When Shinkuro followed her line of sight he came across the cake shop that they had passed by before. It was in the center of the shopping district and was a flourishing shop. Shinkuro and his teacher had been given gifts from this shop several times. The cakes and homemade ice cream that they sold where delicious and very popular. There were several grade school kids who had bought soft served ice cream in front of the store eating together. Murasaki watched the children but then noticed that Shinkuro was watching her and proceeded to explain herself in a flustered manner.

"It, it is not as though I wish to eat that, it is food for children! I was simply looking; I had no other intentions."

It was too easy to see through her lie.

Shinkuro felt that it was still acceptable to eat something cold in winter, so he went into the store and bought two soft served ice creams. Shinkuro handed one of the ice creams to Murasaki; her eyes began to gleam and she reached out for it, however her pride would not allow her to immediately take it and she crossed her arms across her chest.

"I do not have interest in cheep products. ...But, well, since you said that you wish to give it to me, it would be discourteous to refuse it. I would feel terrible if I insulted your sincerity, so it would only be appropriate to accept it, correct."

After giving her long-winded excuse, Murasaki took the ice cream. She liked to eat sweet things like any other child. As Murasaki licked the ice cream with her small tongue, she gradually became more relaxed.

Shinkuro ate his ice cream beside her but he did not let his guard down while doing, vigilantly observing their surroundings. Shinkuro had no way of knowing when or where they may be attacked. Shinkuro still did not know who was after Murasaki.

*I suppose now is a good time* thought Shinkuro and he decided to ask Murasaki.

"Hey, who's chasing after you, did you hear anything from Benika?"

"Shinkuro, what is that?"

*Did she seriously just ignore me*

Shinkuro reluctantly looked to where Murasaki was pointing and there he saw a drug store. There were various supplements gathered on the store's shelves and it was swarmed with customers. From what he had seen on

television, such things seemed to be becoming rather popular recently. They were a result of the "health boom" that had started. Everyone was desperately trying to preserve his or her health. They were afraid of becoming ill.

Murasaki plainly explained how to stay healthy and then tilted her head in wonder.

"Why are they supplementing themselves with medicine? If one eats, exercises and sleeps well then he or she will naturally become healthy will they not?"

"You are right about that but...in reality it does not work that way. Eating, exercising and sleeping."

"Why is that?"

"Well..."

*Why is it that way*

Shinkurou finished his ice cream and balled up the paper that covered it in his hand; has he rolled the paper in his hand he thought about what he had said.

There was more to Murasaki's argument. Because simply living normally was not sufficient, there was a need for medicine to be healthy. What people did not have enough of was proper nutrition and time. Good hygiene and the reduction of fatigue, these had been the material for a television special, which had reviewed them in a verbose manner. Poor health was the result of poor hygiene and fatigue; everyone knew this. In this society everyone was in poor health and was tired. It was not only the rising crime rate that was putting a strain on society; this was as well was it not?

As Shinkurou thought about how shocked he was for being so ignorant that he could not answer Murasaki's simple question, he threw the paper from his ice cream into a trash can. Had Murasaki asked the question for fun from the beginning? She did not seem particularly displeased.

"Well, I suppose there are various things in the outside world"

"Outside world...?"

"Regarding your previous question"

Murasaki abruptly returned to the previous subject that they were speaking about as she licked her ice cream.

"I am unable to answer anything regarding what you wish to know"

"Why?"

"I was told to not say anything by Benika Juuzawa"

"Seriously..."

"I do not really understand it well but it seems that some things are better left unsaid"

*I don't understand her reasoning.*

*What more is that it seems to be based on Benika's intuition?*

*I wonder if this is meant to test me...?*

How far would Shinkurou be able to go? Was this a test by Benika to see his potential? Still Shinkurou thought that the risk associated with taking care of Murasaki where much too great.

Murasaki looked up at Shinkurou's trouble profile for a moment but then put her remaining ice cream in her mouth.

"...Is it really, okay for it to be with him?"

"Huh?"

"No, It is nothing"

Murasaki said this then threw the paper from her ice cream in the trash.

"Well, let us get going home Shinkurou. It will be getting cold soon"

"Okay"

Murasaki looked up once more at Shinkurou, who while nodding his head was not completely satisfied with their conversation.

"I forgot one thing. Thank you, Shinkurou. The ice cream was delicious"

"...I am glad that you liked it"

Her manner of speech was arrogant but she was a very honest child.

Naturally she wanted to show her good intentions toward Shinkurou and this was the feeling that he had from her.

Was this her Kuhouin blood, or was it part of her character.

What kind of adult will she become?

As Shinkurou walked with Murasaki underneath the winter sky, he thought of such things.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 2-6**

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Translation Notes and References

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 2-7**

Once night fell, Tamaki came carrying five-dozen cans of beer and a dozen cans of soda. She even handed Shinkurou a used heater from her university.

“Is this okay?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine”

“...Even though there is a sticker that says, *Removal from school grounds is strictly prohibited?*”

“It’s fine, it’s fine”

*Is that really true*, thought Shinkurou but because he was thankful he accepted Tamaki’s gift. If it were just himself he would be able to handle the cold but there was no way that he would force Murasaki to endure it as well.

Yamie joined them later on; it was her first time meeting Murasaki so in a formal voice she exchanged greetings with Murasaki.

“My name is Yamie. Pleased to meet you, girl”

“Yes, pleased”

Taking advantage of the opportunity Yamie also introduced David, the black cat at her feet. David looked up at Murasaki and then meowed, Murasaki responded with a meow as well. Murasaki then moved her gaze to Yamie and stared at her intently.

Yamie wore all black and a skull necklace charm, as one would expect Murasaki would probably have been surprised by her.

“...Are you a witch?”

It was such a brazen question, was it because she was so young?

The mood was not particularly affected and Yamie answered Murasaki.

“No, I am a wicked woman”

“Wicked woman?”

“I lead men by the nose and live in refinement with the support of their money; as a woman I am of the upmost quality”

Murasaki looked at Yamie with an earnest look of admiration that said, *that is amazing*; Shinkurou made a stained smile.

Shinkurou had moved into May Rain Manor at the same time he had entered high school but he was not acquainted with all of the tenants. The only ones that he interacted with were Yamie from room 4 and Tamaki from room 6. Apart from them there was Koumori in room 1 who was hardly ever there and as for the remaining rooms somehow Shinkurou did not know if anyone lived in them. Shinkurou had not even seen the manager since he had moved in.

From the beginning it seemed that it was normal for there to be little interaction among the tenants at May Rain Manor; It seemed that it was rare for him to interact with Yamie and Tamaki as well. At May Rain Manor one was free to do as they please in his or her own room. Besides, it was pointless for the other tenants to meddle with each other. Even if a tenant was obviously committing a crime and Shinkurou knew about it he would probably not report them to the police. When he moved there he adhered to this rule.

Tamaki and Yamie knew about Shinkurou's dispute mediation business but they did not know anything beyond that about him. Shinkurou as well only knew that Tamaki was a college student and that she was the neighborhood karate instructor, and that he knew nothing about Yamie's everyday life.

*Despite meeting Yamie nearly every day, we have such a shallow relationship?* As Shinkurou thought this he found that he liked the limited interactions between them. He felt that it was good to be able to interact with each other normally in a mutual manner without knowing much about one another. There were many things that Shinkurou did not want others to know about him.

All four of them sat down at the dining table, which Shinkurou had set up with a gas stove and hot pot. The contents of the hot pot were boiled tofu. Because Tamaki and Yamie had no cooking skills at all, inevitably it was up to Shinkurou to prepare the meal. Murasaki silently watched the hot pot come to a boil; was it her first time having hot pot? When Shinkurou served tofu and Chinese cabbage into a bowl and handed it to Murasaki; she blew on the food as she ate it and then smiled a bit. She seemed pleased with it. By then Tamaki had already emptied ten cans of beer and Yamie slowly drank hers little by little. With the four of them gathered in such a small room it soon became hot and once Shinkurou saw that Yamie was preparing to light a cigarette, he opened the window. A single dead leaf blew in with the cool fresh air as it filled the room. The leaf landed on Murasaki's head and without noticing she continued eating with a smile upon her face; Shinkurou casually picked the leaf up with his fingertips and returned it back outside of the window.

"...So Shinkurou, how far have you and Yuuno gone?"

Tamaki was starting to become drunk; she wrapped her hand around Shinkurou's neck and pulled him towards herself. Her face was red and her breath reeked of alcohol; She had a broad grin across her face, there was little difference between her and a drunken old man.

Because this happened so often, Shinkurou simply drank some oolong tea and calmly endured it.

"There is nothing really going on between us"

"Then, Ginko? Are you fooling around with your childhood friend, you lady-killer!"

"Don't talk about strange subjects please!"

"Don't be so bashful. Come on warm me up a bit. Is it okay if I call you Tamachan?"

"...Your breast, please zip up your jacket. I can see your bra"

"And yet you're excited"

"I am not interested at all"

"Oh, are you making fun of my 77 centimeter bust!<sup>1</sup> If you round it up it's 80!"



Despite Tamaki rubbing her fist against his head telling him to be kinder to her, Shinkurou added more tofu to the hot pot and then he adjusted the temperature of the stove. When he looked at Murasaki she was cutting up small pieces of tofu and feeding them to David. However David would not put the hot tofu in his mouth. Murasaki thought about it and then cooled the tofu and offered it to David. At last David ate the tofu and Murasaki laughed happily.

"Cats certainly are cute creatures"

As Murasaki stroked David's coat he purred blissfully showing how good it felt.

Shinkurou, who looked up this scene, thought to himself, *It's not bad*. He could not explain what was not bad but as he watched Murasaki's child like smile for a moment he felt like he was free from the various things of life. This was how powerful her smiling face was. Was humanity this simple? This kind of simplicity was not bad on occasion.

"So, there were definitely some good men at the university but they did not want to go out with a woman who seemed like she could break a rock with her fist. Running a full marathon in geta is really strange. What do you think about this?"

"...I am not really sure what to think"

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 2-7**

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#### Translation Notes and References

1. As a reference to American cup sizes Tamaki is likely somewhere between a B and C cup based on this measurement.

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)[Next Page](#)**Volume 1****Chapter 2-8**

Several days later during lunch break.

Shinkuro, having been caught in the crowd at the school store, was only able to buy an oolong tea; he had thought about inviting Ginko to come eat with him in the cafeteria but when he came to the classroom he could not find her.

Shinkuro asked a nearby girl if she had seen Ginko and he was told that she had disappeared while going somewhere and holding her laptop. The girl told him that he was better off not getting involved with Ginko as a word of advice but Shinkuro simply gave an ambiguous smile, said thank you and then left the classroom. Around the first semester there were girls who tried to be friends with Ginko, however now she was completely hated by them. There was a reason for this; it was likely because Ginko gave off an air that made people want to avoid her. Yet, she showed no sign of changing, as she was not worried about how she was viewed.

Shinkuro thought about the difference between compromise and cooperation as he walked through the hall, and as he headed down the stairs, guessing where Ginko may be, he passed by the dance hall, running into an acquaintance of his.

"Ah, Shinkuro"

"...Yuno"

Shinkuro could tell that everyone was looking towards them. It was not he who was being looked at but the girl before him. Without asking others, the majority of people passing by on the stairs stopped and simply looked at Yuno. All the boys stared enviously. This in turn made the girls grow jealous.

"I was able to see you just in time. This is a teeny work of fate"

Yuno Houzuki, a Seiryou Academy second year student, said this with a gentle smile on her face.

"When you look up 'Yamato Nadeshiko'<sup>1</sup>, in the dictionary 'Yuno Houzuki' is what's written," is what the boys at school said and their girlfriends were gauged by this standard to see how pretty they were. Neat, modest looking and always gently smiling, and yet she lacked all formality. Yuno, whom one could see had a perfect harmony of appearance and personality, was the goal that boys aspired to achieve; in order to simply get a picture of her boys seemed to even come from other schools.

Shinkuro understood this feeling. If he were to think about who was the most aware of the opposite sex, Yuno would be the only one to not come to mind, and if he were to think about who was the most frightening of the opposite sex, she would be without a doubt Yuno.

Yuno was the granddaughter of Shinkuro's master and as such was like an older sister to him.

Yuno, who had grown accustomed to drawing attention to herself since she was very young, had probably grown accustomed to her current treatment as well. Yuno turned towards the people staring at her and elegantly peeked

over towards them and silently gave them a gentle smile. Without knowing why, the people that Yuno smiled at were content. By then it had already been ten minutes.

At school no one was aware of Shinkurou existence, as he was less than average when it came to studies, looks, and sports. This did not bother him; he was able to be free of spite of other and probably was like the shadow of the refreshing air Yuno had. There was the fact that she was his master's granddaughter, thus allowing for Shinkurou to regularly interact with her but the intimate nature of their relationship could seem a bit strange; this was explained by saying that they were distant relatives. Saying that they were relatives was a lie but they had lived in the same house for eight years.

"Have you already finished lunch Shinkurou?"

"Not yet..."

"Ah, good"

Yuno sighed in relief and handed Shinkurou something bundled up. Without checking what was inside he knew it was a bento box.

"Chi-chan had a school trip today and I went a bit overboard on the preparations. So I figured I would share with you"

"Thank you Yuno"

"Not at all"

Yuno gave him a sweet smile and then winked for some reason.

Then the stares of everyone around them pierced Shinkurou.

"Shinkurou"

"Yes"

"Are you okay?"

"Huh, what is it?"

"You seem a bit unwell"

She had very keen intuition.

Shinkurou was worried that she may see through his façade and figure out that he is guarding Murasaki.

"I feel better when I am able meet you Yuno"

After he said that to avoid her question, Yuno stared intently at him but Shinkurou had decided not to tell her; Yuno, saddened, then dropped her shoulders.

"...It is something that you can not talk to me about isn't it?"

"Ah, well, it's because it has to do with work"

"Men always ignore women by saying something has to do with work"

"Not at all, aren't you exaggerating a bit..."

"It breaks my heart. Despite me opening my heart to you, you keep everything secret; your heart is tightly locked away and I get this feeling like you are saying, *I don't need to speak to you about anything*, you must be around your rebellious age. I may just make some chilled Chinese noodles tonight because I am so sad. I will add some finely crushed ice and upon seeing my frozen broken heart my family will eat it; afterwards I will serve them all ice-cold ice cream and they will all still..."

Shinkurou gave in.

"I'm sorry. The real reason that I am so tired is because I was asked to be a bodyguard and I haven't gotten used to it yet"

"A bodyguard you say, who are you guarding? A woman?"

"A man. An old man. He is a very grouchy person"

"Oh, that seems very troublesome"

*Hahah*, Shinkurou lightly laughed.

If Yuno found out that it was a job from Benika she would become angry, thus Shinkurou gave her detailed but false information about the job. Yuno knew that Shinkurou was a dispute mediator but as far as how he was involved with Benika, that was a different story. "She is the prime example of a corrupt adult. You are not going to become like her are you?" Shinkurou could not remember how many times he had been told this. She was not even comfortable with the fact that Shinkurou and Benika still associated with each other.

"Shinkurou, it is good that you take your work so seriously but are you making sure to take care of yourself?"

"Well, when I get the chance too..."

"Your answer?"

"Yes"

"Good," said Yuno happily smiling; she then reached out her hands and fixed Shinkurou's messy school uniform. Yuno patted Shinkurou on his sides and then content she nodded her head.

"See you soon"

Yuno slightly bowed and then went up the stairs. She seemed to not be in a hurry and drifted away. The wind blowing in from the windows made her black hair sway in the wind and the numerous students that she passed by turned their heads to look at her. In the midst of them all there also seemed to be some who were taking pictures with their cell phones.

If he had never enrolled at her grandfather's dojo he would probably have been one of the boys standing at the sidelines. If that were the case though was he truly happy with the way things currently were?

Shinkurou looked at the bento that Yuno gave him and smiled a little as he headed down the stairs.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 2-8**

## Translation Notes and References

1) (大和撫子) This term refers to the traditional Japanese ideal beauty, and in more modern times simply to refer to an extremely beautiful and delicate woman.

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 2-9**

As for the whereabouts of Ginko, she was by the school paper's clubroom. There was a plaque that read *News Paper Club* next to the entrance but in actuality this was a complete lie. The only member was Ginko and as expected she was also president. Ginko wanted to keep the entire room to herself. It had not always been this way, at one point there were other members but Ginko chased them off with her attitude. Selling personal information, that was the basis for an information broker's work. If Ginko were interested she could expose all the secrets of the students around her. This was part of the reason she was able to get a teacher as advisor for the club and even how she got her budget to an extent.

Ginko was alone in the clubroom and yet it was fully heated. Ginko, who was on her laptop, took one glance at Shinkuro, who had just entered the room, and then immediately returned to looking at her computer screen.

“Would it kill you to knock”

“This is practically my club room too”

“This here, is my club room. Were you not informed?”

Since it seemed that she was not actually bothered by it, Shinkuro lightly knocked on the door.

“Come in”

Shinkuro, having received Ginko's permission, closed the door; Shinkuro pulled out a chair and sat down where he could see Ginko's back. From outside of the window Shinkuro could see the many trees by the side of the school changing color, spelling the change in season. The tumult outside had almost all but disappeared. It was as if time had stopped in the room and everything had fallen silent. The equipment that the former newspaper had once used was gone, now the only things that remained were a table and a few chairs.

Shinkuro sat his bento on his lap and opened it up; Ginko while still looking at her computer screen then said,

“Disgusting”

“What is?”

“That, Yuno gave it to you right?”

“...Word travels fast doesn't it”

“Repulsive”

“Yea but what is?”

“I hate that person”

Ginko loathed both Benika and Yuno. If one were to say what Ginko and Yuno had in common it would certainly only

be their hatred for Benika. Shinkuro said that it was good that his starting of his current life and his ability to have this life come to fruition was thanks to both of them. Ginko was probably unable to stomach this idea.

When Shinkuro decided that he wanted to become a dispute mediator, Ginko, who at the time was not an information broker, looked at him with a grim face as she gave her thoughts on the matter.

"Do you remember what you said when we were younger? 'When I grow up I want to open a ramen shop up with you Ginko' do you remember saying that? That is what you are best suited for. That is your limit. Dispute mediation? While this seems a lot like you, you will have to hit, kick and wound people, all the while people will hit, kick and wound you; do you think that you can go on living like that? Do you honestly believe that you can live like that? If you think so then you are an idiot. You are a real idiot. An idiot in need of help. Seriously, just go wherever you please and go die however you please. Just die!"

When Ginko had said that Shinkuro was at a loss for words.

If he were to have said something, would it have been okay? Shinkuro did not know at the time and therefore said nothing.

Even now Shinkuro still did no know.

Shinkuro took a pickled plum from his bento and put it in his mouth; it was not the cheap kind, the bitterness of it caused Shinkuro to grimace. The simmered taro had the nostalgic flavor of his times at the Houzuki house. The flavor of the honey stewed *kabocha*<sup>1</sup>. Shinkuro had long forgotten the taste of his mothers cooking however he still remembered the taste of the Houzuki's cooking.

Ginko had already read today's paper and had it set on the table. Due to the nature of her job, she kept a close eye on everything reported by the media. What Ginko said on the matter was that she checked incase something important were to happen. *I keep the most important information in my head* is what Ginko claimed; she had been in school for less than ten years but her results on her school work proved what she had said.

Shinkuro picked up the newspaper. The clubroom was a quiet place to pass time; because he could also read a newspaper, Shinkuro would occasionally visit. If Ginko were in a bad mood she would drive him out; essentially she would overlook his presence, this probably being because they had known each other for so long.

As Shinkuro looked at an article on professional baseball he turned the page, the entire page was about a suspect for the assault of a pregnant woman who had finally been caught. The culprits were just ten-year-old boys. It seemed that they were not aware of their crime, "Her huge stomach was an eyesore" was what one boy said and so it seemed that they attacked her on such grounds. "This is a failure on the part of the education system and shows that it must be immediately reformed" was what one politician said and following that, "These types of unusual thoughts will always be a possibility in youth. There is no need to try to snuff it out" was what another politician said in reply, to which the mothers of the boys added, "Our sons are the victims of society" and finally it was brought to a close with a comment from a critic, "There are all sorts of value systems, this is a characteristic of modern society."

Shinkuro could not sympathize with attacking a pregnant woman but in this society one is able to be pardoned for nearly anything; Shinkuro really could not sympathize with them.

"Ginko what do you think about a persons true character and being normal?"

"A persons true character and being normal are both a will to be a certain way that one decides and then continues to uphold."

It was obvious that she was not listening but from the tone of her voice it was probably good that he received some sort of answer. Normally when Ginko was not in a good mood, she would simply ignore him. *She's already lowered*

*her guard a bit; maybe we can become friends* thought Shinkuro but when he looked at their current situations and how unlike him Ginko did not have any close friends, Shinkuro realized that they were not on equal grounds in that regard. Ginko had been socially cut off from the rest of the class and Shinkuro was a forgettable shadow. It was in this way that the two of them met; it probably would not be likely that those around them would even notice.

*Somewhere there are scientist working on making a machine to measure one's true self but are failing*, as Shinkuro thought about such trivial things Ginko, who was still looking at her computer screen spoke to him.

"I still need time on that request that you made"

"Are that Kuhouin's that difficult to get information about?"

"They are"

It must have been true because Ginko's response was very frank.

Being the greatest plutocratic family in Japan they must have developed some way to cover up their tracks.

"Others like the Kirinzuka and Kogonomiya are like that too however these plutocrats are all strong in that respect. Naturally they house immense power and influence. They keep their secrets well hidden. For example, have you ever seen the face of the Kuhouin family head?"

"No, I never have. ...I don't even think that I have seen him in the newspapers or on television"

"Do you understand why?"

"Not really"

"Those who truly have power do not show themselves in public"

*A question. Who is the most powerful person in this country?*

*The answer. The prime minister.*

*This is what most people honestly believe, likely since they were in elementary school.*

*But who's really the most powerful person in the country?*

*The answer, "who knows." It's unknown who they really are. Whoever and wherever kind of person they are is unknown. It's for that reason that those who hold power are so great. Those who truly hold power are not well known by the masses. In that respect they are much like a god that looks down on the world from heaven.*

*Exactly like those who reside above the clouds huh...?*

*If Ginko knew that I was living in the same room as a daughter of the Kuhouin what kind of face would she make?*

Shinkuro thought about these things but as expected he could not come to any real conclusion.

"Still, you should be careful."

"Of what?"



"You have you heard of the Aku Company haven't you?"

"Ah, for example..."

The Aku Company were a so called *staffing agency*. However in the underworld it was common knowledge that they were a company that specialized in supplying skilled personnel rush in at a moments notice. Fighting, murdering, casting spells, collecting payment, escaping, guarding and much more, they were an organization that employed people with various skills.

"As long as one has the money, they will aid with any crime. If they view you as a nuisance they will crush you"

"I do not compete with them so they will probably have no interest"

If the Aku Company, which dealt in international crime, could be likened to an enterprise then Shinkurou was like a small shop in the low-lying parts of a city. Shinkurou did not think that he would ever have a confrontation with the Aku Company because if he were to describe his job it would entail catching underwear thieves and stalkers as well as taking care of noise complaints for his apartment manager and stopping fights.

"I have decided that what I do is good; you have more to worry about than me. It is not rare for information brokers to be silenced"

As a standard Ginko only bought and sold information through the Internet, this allowed her to avoid danger as much as possible. Ginko's grandfather was confident in his physical strength but Ginko was a lost cause when it came to exercise. Once during P.E on a day when Ginko was supposed to be out sick, she unexpectedly came. That day there was an obstacle race and Ginko decided to do it at her own pace, that very day there was a three-minute difference between her time and the first place time. No matter how many times Ginko fell down as she ran Shinkurou cheered her on yet in return all he received was a slap. Ginko hated seeming inferior and ever since then she has not participated in any event like it.

"If you run into any trouble please tell me. I will give you top priority"

"What is your rate?"

"The usual amount is fine, since it is you after all"

That instant Ginko stopped typing, soon after though she began again.

"...You really are an idiot after all"

Ginko did not call Shinkurou stupid because she disliked him, it was something from when they were younger.

Shinkurou had once decided to be referred to as that but had stopped at some point.

He was certain that her calling him now was probably from that time.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 2-9**

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Translation Notes and References



# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 2-10**

After school, as Shinkurou headed to the shoe rack it seemed that nearly everyone had already left. Shinkurou stopped by the newspaper club's room so that he could look at the paper that he had left there during his lunch break. Shinkurou read the newspaper and then realized, "society is overflowing with trouble." As far as Shinkurou was concerned he had work because of this; he may have even been slightly delighted by this. After all he made a living off of others misfortune. Jobs such as dispute mediation were not what one would consider very admirable trades. Ginko being angry with him was in no way unreasonable.

Shinkurou, having changed his shoes and left the school building, squinted as he emerged into the crimson of the setting sun. The soccer club members yelled energetically as they ran around on the field. They all played sports in this cold weather. Shinkurou watched them practice for a short while, seeing them replenished his own youthful energy. From watching them he was able to confirm that he had not yet become that kind of high school student. "My life is good," said Shinkurou, praising himself a bit. He then headed for the school gate.

Shinkurou let out a yawn and then as he walked he thought back on recent events.

At first Shinkurou was uneasy about Murasaki, who had barged into his comfortable solitary life, though she turned out to not be much of a hindrance upon his life. Shinkurou had given Murasaki one strict order; "do not leave May Rain Manor by yourself." In return, Murasaki demanded that once Shinkurou returned home from school he would take her on a walk; with that one condition Murasaki obediently stayed within May Rain Manor's grounds. It seemed that while Shinkurou was gone Murasaki had mimicked Yamie by climbing up into a tree; read a manga that she had borrowed from Tamaki and played video games. Shinkurou thought about how when he was younger he would spend most of his time playing outside; because of this Shinkurou figured that Murasaki must be much more obedient than he was.

*No, that's probably not true...*

As Shinkurou watched fallen leaves dance in the wind, he began to think more on the matter.

*Murasaki seemed completely okay with staying in such a cramped space. Everything she brought with her was male clothing; the only thing that wasn't was the dress from when we first met. Based on that I can understand why she can be so energetic but even in someplace quite, she can enjoy the silence; she has that kind of mature flexibility about her. Is that something she was born with; or is it something that she learned later on? She said that she did not go to school; maybe the Kuhoin family lessons included sewing.*

*She is not all that different from a normal child, was what Shinkurou honestly believed.*

For example, food.

"Shinkurou, I dislike bell peppers"

"I dislike picky children"

In that case, without her knowing, Shinkurou compromised by finely chopping them up.

Another example would be when she had to go to the restroom in the middle of the night.

It would be late at night and she would lightly smack Shinkurou on the face repeatedly to wake him up and then as if it were a matter of great importance order him.

"Accompany me to the restroom"

There were numerous fluorescent light in May Rain Manor's halls however even during the day it was dark and even more so late at night; so it was understandable for a child to be afraid.

"It is not what you think. This does not mean that I am scared. This is not related to me being scared at all. So do not suspect me of being so"

Murasaki frantically explained herself to Shinkurou; he put on his jacket and took her to the restroom. Then Murasaki took care of business and Shinkurou waited in the hallway. As Shinkurou endured his drowsiness in the cold hall, he recalled his past experiences and found himself, among other things, felling nostalgic.

*Well in its own way this is probably good for her.*

*The question is, who is after her.*

*There're a lot ways that she can be kidnapped or killed. I can't afford to be careless.*

Shinkurou passed through the school gate; as he walked along his usual route home he looked to the sky. The clouds had grown darker than before.

"It's probably going to rain..."

"Yes. The weather forecast claimed that it would rain this evening"

Shinkurou recognized the young voice that he heard.

Confused, Shinkurou turned around and there stood Murasaki. Murasaki, in front of Shinkurou who was too surprised to speak, had a curious expression on her face the said, "Hm, so this is a school" as she looked up at the school building. She was dressed in a typical boy jacket and shorts. Was this some kind of disguise? She also wore a baseball cap.

"...Wha, What do you think you are doing coming all the way here!"

After taking a deep breath that was all that Shinkurou could say.

Shinkurou had not told her where Seiryou academy was.

When asked, Murasaki calmly answered.

"Tamaki brought me here"

From what Murasaki told him it seemed that when she told Tamaki about her interest in school Tamaki said, "Then I'll take you" and then brought her all the way here. Shinkurou had not told Tamaki that he was guarding Murasaki; Tamaki's intentions were probably good but it was rather bothersome.

"Honestly, I told you not to leave May Rain Manor..."

"You said not to leave by myself. Therefore, if I am accompanied by someone all is well is it not?"

"Well that..."

"I thought that Tamaki was a woman whom I can trust, was I mistaken?"

"No you're not but..."

"Shinkurou, show me the inside immediately. I wish to see a classroom"

"There's no way that's happening"

Shinkurou looked around; there did not seem to be anyone around at the moment. It was late; was he happy that there were not that many students around?

"So, where is Tamaki?"

"She said that she was going to go watch a movie. She said that she was going to watch something called a *poruno* movie"

*That perverted woman...*

Tamaki's interests were in various types of manga and bad B-movies that had adult content. Her room was filled with various comics, questionable imported movies and DVD's scattered all over the floor. Just how many times had Shinkurou helped her clean up her room because it was just so messy? Shinkurou did not wish to remember, as all he could do when helping was avert his eyes from everything that he saw.

Tamaki probably had just brought Murasaki along as she ran her own errands. Tamaki was nothing but trouble however there was the one thing that was her saving grace. Her personality was a problem however as a martial artist she was worthy of respect. If Tamaki were accompanying Murasaki then she would be even safer than if she were with Shinkurou. Even with that being the case, Tamaki wandering off to that place that she always goes was not okay.

If Tamaki came home Shinkurou would give her an earful. He would not lend her rice for a while. While swearing this to himself, Shinkurou urged Murasaki to start walking. Murasaki continued to request that she be shown around the school, but once she saw that Shinkurou showed no intention of listening to her she reluctantly obeyed him. The two of them walked to the train station without saying a word and then rode the train while still saying nothing. Because there were empty seats Murasaki sat down and then immediately turned her back towards Shinkurou and looked at the scenery outside of the windows. From what Shinkurou was able to see of her profile, it seemed that her mood had lightened some. A quick conversation to exchange their feelings would help.

"You're not going to come to the school again are you? Of the things that I worry about..."

"Trains are convenient however the seats lack any level of comfort"

Murasaki ignored Shinkurou's scolding and continued to enjoy looking out the window.

Shinkurou figured that he ought to speak more strictly because Murasaki showed no signs of remorse; as he hesitated, Shinkurou heard the boisterous conversations in the other train cars. When he took a closer look he found that it was from the priority seats. There was an old woman sitting down and being harassed by three young men. It seemed that their search for seats had been fruitless and thus they decided to have the old woman vacate the priority seats so that they could sit there. Was this kind of selfishness really what modern day youth was like?

The yelling of the young men echoed inside of the train car.

"Grannie, can't you tell that we're tired! Can't you see that we want to sit down!"

"Hurry up and stand you old hag! There's no problem with being a little considerate is there!"

"We loose our tempers real easy, so don't be stupid or we'll kill you; I'm serious"

The old woman's face went completely pale. She tried to stand up though it seemed that her legs were weak as she reached for her cane her movements were very slow. One of the youth grew impatient and pulled the old woman away from the seat. The young men looked at the old woman as she fell onto her back and howled in laughter; one of them then kicked the woman's cane that had fallen beside her, sending it flying across the car. After doing so they laughed once again.

The other passengers looked at the young men reproachfully but when the young men looked their way they all looked away. If one going to get involved in something unprepared; he or she should at least be prepared to loose. If the situation were to lead to a fight both parties would be at fault and treated the same; they seemed like the type who had already received a criminal record. Shinkurou was angry but he simply closed his eyes. The passengers had considered the benefits and losses of being involved and did not even so much as help the fallen woman stand up.

So *it's like that* thought Shinkurou.

Shinkurou felt in his heart that his reasoning was just. Justice, in reality did not exist.

Therefore it was up to people dispute mediators make it one.

Shinkurou took this train to school and did not want to stand out however he had not been taught to ignore situations like this during his training. It seemed that there was a way to settle things peacefully; thus Shinkurou stood up though a small person passed his field of vision. Shinkurou took off running towards the three youth, by which Murasaki had taken the place where Shinkurou was meant to be. Before long Shinkurou came to a stop; Murasaki pick up a can, which had been discarded in the train, and threw it at one of the young men. Murasaki missed her target however and the can hit the window, but the young men having taken notice turned towards their small assailant.

"...What is it, brat?"

As they looked at her with intimidating stares, Murasaki did not falter.

Murasaki hit one of them on the back and then made a brazen statement.

"You should be ashamed!"

Her voice suited for commanding and rebuking resounded throughout the entire car. It was a voice suited for conveying ones intentions. Was this due to her Kuhouin blood as well?

Murasaki continued as the young men stood in embarrassment.

"You knaves are already this old and what have you learned! You do things such as tormenting the weak in groups; you are the lowest of the low as a human; your actions are deplorable!"

Shinkurou admired what she said but it did not seem to get through to the young men. Their faces showed that they felt a cheeky brat was preaching to them.

"Shut up with all that screaming brat"

"I'll hit you. I'll hit you real hard"

"Hey, where is this brats parent! Come out!"

Their harsh words resounded in the car and Shinkurou came running from where he was.

Shinkurou then immediately tried to come to an ideal solution for the problem at hand.

"I am her guardian, I am terribly sorry!"

Shinkurou grabbed the back of Murasaki's head and made her bow with him.

"Please forgive her. She is still small and is ignorant about many things"

Shinkurou covered Murasaki's mouth when she tried to give a discourteous rebuttal and continued to bow. Shinkurou felt that outside of work he should avoid resorting to violence. One reason was that Shinkurou believed that a professional should not use their strength outside of work. Another reason was emotions.

"I am truly sorry. Please let this pass and forgive her"

As Shinkurou gave them an insincere smile he bowed several times. Shinkurou understood why his legs began to faintly quiver. He could not stop. Why could he not stop?

"Show us your back"

They saw Shinkurou's legs shaking and laughed scornfully, one of them then spit on Shinkurou's face. The spit, which reeked of nicotine, clung to Shinkurou's face; nevertheless Shinkurou's forced smile did not disappear. The other two seemed as if they were going to also spit on Shinkurou's face but the train began to slow down and they stopped. It seemed that the current stop was where they were getting off.

"He's not worth our time"

They lightly pushed Shinkurou's head and then left the train as they laughed. Right after they left the doors closed and the train began to move again; afterward Shinkurou took his hand off of Murasaki.

"Don't be so rash will you. Think a bit before..."

"I was performing a righteous act, what is necessary for me to think about! It is troublesome to be in the company of such a coward! It is excessively irritating"

"It's obvious..."

"Then what was that from before!"

"That?"

"That atrocious smile of yours"

Shinkurou gave Murasaki a cold stare and then shut his mouth as if he had lost the argument.

Was Murasaki referring to Shinkurou's forced smile just now?

Shinkurou, who had an astonished look on his face, let out a breath from his nose and then Murasaki squinted her eyes as she looked at him.

"You may be knowledgeable about the world but I hate things such as what I just witnessed. Smiling just to earn someone's favor, it is sheer stupidity. Do you enjoy it Shinkurou? People smile because they are amused. People smile because they are happy. There is nothing to lead me to believe that the disgusting smile that you showed those men was genuine. The evidence has disappeared"

"Don't say whatever you please," said Shinkurou with a bitter smile.

Giving an insincere smile had been Shinkurou's strong point when he was younger; it had allowed him to avoid trouble numerous times. It seemed that acting like a coward had become a habit of his. Even now Shinkurou was fairly good at faking a smile. He did not want to think too much about the reason for this.

Murasaki was honest. So honest that she was scary. So honest that she was annoying.

However it was unpleasant.

She pointed out everything precisely; in this respect she was no different than a childhood friend.

Could it be that Murasaki's rash actions earlier had actually pleased Shinkurou?

He could not do such a thing.

Murasaki held her hand out to Shinkurou, who had remained silent.

"Use this"

In the palm of her small hand was a beautifully embroidered white handkerchief. It was probably for him to wipe the spit off of his face. Because it seemed so expensive, Shinkurou hesitated to use it; Murasaki grew impatient and then shoved it into his chest.

"If my servant is dirty then it puts my character into question, does it not?"

*I see, thought Shinkurou as he thanked her and took the handkerchief. He then came to understand one thing. She did not say those things earlier because she was angry; in fact it was the opposite. There were no other reasons. Her words were used for the exact same reason. There was not even a spec of lies mixed into her words. That frankness was pleasant.*

*Despite using an insincere smile so often, why would I expect sincerity from other people...?*

As Shinkurou bitterly smiled once again due to his selfishness, he wiped his face and then the old woman gave him a humble thank you. *I didn't do anything, you should be thanking Murasaki*, said Shinkurou and then a happy smile rose upon the old woman's intensely wrinkled face and she gently stroked Murasaki's head. Murasaki was surprisingly not annoyed by this and smiled.

As Shinkurou watched the two he realized something.

Despite brushing away Shinkurou's hand, for some reason she did not get angry when Tamaki, the liquor store owner or the old woman touched her. The answer was the old woman's smile. Tamaki, the liquor store owner and the old woman all had naturally happy smiles. However when he and Murasaki first met, Shinkurou received her with an insincere smile. Murasaki probably hated this kind of deceit. From a child's standpoint it was not wrong to not want to be touched by someone like that.

As a matter of fact that was what is called a child's honesty.

Murasaki and the old woman sat down together and Shinkurou stood nearby while holding onto one of the train straps.

Shinkurou then stroked his own face.

*What could be so disturbing about my smile? Is it because it's fake?*

*Why can't I smile naturally? I think there was a time when I could smile for real.*

*Being able to smile, why did it become so awkward to talk about once I became aware of it?*

These were the things that Shinkuro thought about.

It may have been because he was missing something.

It was from that time when he experienced a loss that took everything from him.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 2-10**

---

---

Translation Notes and References

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-1**

Shinkuro had never used an alarm clock. When he was younger, his mother or his older sister would wake him up. Later, Ginko took over this role. Since there always was someone to wake him up, he never needed an alarm clock. It was not until Shinkuro started living alone that he quickly came to realize the joy of waking up to the voice of another person, as well as the sense of security derived from entrusting his life to someone else. After losing that, he was not inclined to use a machine as a substitute but endeavored to wake himself up instead. This had caused him to be late numerous times, but before long, he had grown accustomed to it. Nowadays, he would naturally wake up around the same time every day. An adverse affect of this habit was that whenever someone woke him at a time other than when he would usually wake up, he would be groggy for a period of time.

Today was one of those days. Someone knocked on Shinkuro's door and he immediately opened his eyes. However, being still half asleep, Shinkuro looked at his clock and saw that it was only six in the morning. He had yet to fully come to his senses.

"Shinkuro, are you still sleeping?"

"Where've I heard this cheerful voice before? Ah, it's probably Yuno," said Shinkuro as he let out a yawn. Shinkuro tried to get out from underneath his futon but curled back up instead because of the cold air that had filled his room. It was a winter morning and it was still freezing at this hour. Shinkuro hesitated before turning on his electric stove or unlocking his door , before hearing Yuno speak again.

"Shinkuro, are you still sleeping?"

"Yes, I just woke up."

"Then I'm coming in."

*You're full of energy from early in the morning as always.*

As Shinkuro thought this to himself in a state of drowsiness, he let out another yawn. Yuno had a duplicate key to his apartment and would occasionally come to visit. She would clean his room and help out in various ways that would make others envious of Shinkuro. *You don't have to help me so much*, thought Shinkuro. However, he was happy that she visited and did not regard her visits as an annoyance.

"Sorry for disturbing you."

As the door opened, Shinkuro saw that Yuno was holding her school bag in one hand and a plastic bag containing groceries in the other. Shinkuro thought that Yuno would continue with the usual, *Good morning, Shinkuro*; so why then did she stop by the door and stood there, speechless? Yuno seemed to tense up as she stared straight ahead.

"...What's wrong, Yuno?"

She did not answer.

Upon further observation, Shinkurou noticed that rather than staring at him, Yuno was staring behind him.

Curious, Shinkurou turned around.

At that instant, Shinkurou's brain stopped working.

A pure and angelic sleeping visage. Small slender arms stretching out from underneath a futon. Murasaki was there, sleeping completely naked.

As if trying to hide what was behind him, Shinkurou spread his arms out in front of Yuno and swung them about.

"Yu-Yuno, about this, you see—!"

"Disgusting."

"No, it's not like that! It's nothing like—"

"Disgusting."

"Listen to me! This—"

"...Shinkurou, why are you making so much noise so early in the morning?"

Murasaki had woken up due to the commotion. Still wrapped in her futon, Murasaki sat up and looked at Shinkurou as she rubbed her eyes. Then, she noticed Yuno.

Murasaki's and Yuno's gazes met.

At almost exactly the same time, the two spoke.

"Shinkurou, who is this woman?"

"Shinkurou, who is this?"

Shinkurou stared at them and was at a loss for words.

In the tense atmosphere that filled the room, Murasaki made the first move.

"I *shack up* with Shinkurou!"

"Y—You shack up...?!"

Shinkurou was in disbelief at what Murasaki had just said. He frantically tried to clear things up with Yuno.

"It's not true, it's not true! It's completely not true!"

"Not true? In the manga I borrowed from Tamaki, a man and a woman cohabitating was referred to as *shacking up*"

"That makes you sound like a freeloader!"

"Freeloader?"

Yuno ignored Murasaki and began to tremble in silence.

"...Shinkurou, do you like small children like her?"

Shinkurou searched for the right words to explain everything but it was all in vain due to him being too flustered.

Yuno began to falter and leaned against a wall, then said with a grief stricken expression:

"It can't be, I never thought the day would come when I would have to ask such a thing... This is why I was against you living by yourself. All it would do was to draw you into the vices of the secular world and cause you to break the hearts of young maidens; start making numerous bad friends; roam the streets at night; spend nights dancing at clubs; bleach your hair and start listening to rock and roll as you ride through the streets at night on your first motorcycle!"

"No, um..."

"Shinkurou, sit over there!"

Shinkurou obediently sat down in seiza position where Yuno pointed. It was a rule in the Houzuki family that when one was being scolded, they were supposed to sit that way.

Yuno placed her hands on her hips and looked down at Shinkurou.

"Is everything fine? This is how we used to have to sit when we were seven isn't—"

Shinkurou did not know how to handle Yuno once she became like this. However, Murasaki did not seem to care and asked Yuno a question.

"So, who are you?"

"You introduce yourself first."

*Murasaki being rude to an elder is one thing but Yuno is also being immature*, thought Shinkurou.

The two exchanged looks again and then introduced themselves at the same time.

"My name is Murasaki Kuhouin."

"I'm Yuno Houzuki."

"Houzuki?"

"Kuhouin?"

The two came to a stop with the same look of astonishment on their faces, as if Shinkurou was the only one who did not understand the situation at hand. Both of them then turned towards him and gave him stern stares.

"Explain this, Shinkurou."

"Shinkurou, please explain this."

Shinkurou had no choice but to simply nod.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-1**

## Translation Notes and References

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-2**

Shinkuro told them everything and the situation took a strange turn.

For some reason, both Murasaki and Yuno were silent. As the two of them looked at each other as if they were confirming what they had just been told, their mouths remained shut. They reacted as if they were long-time enemies who just met. The only difference between them was that Yuno had quickly regained her composure unlike Murasaki, who seemed to have become increasingly cautious.

Tension filled the air. Shinkuro found it increasingly difficult to remain comfortable. Then, Yuno smacked her forehead and let out a small sigh.

“...Was this something that Benika thought up? She’s so annoying. Well, if this concerns her then she must be well aware of what she’s doing, but to go so far as to leaving you with a child...”

*What an annoying person*, grumbled Yuno.

“Um, Yuno, are you perhaps angry?”

“What do you think?”

“Ah, well...”

“If that’s the case, what should you do about it?”

“...I’m sorry for lying.”

“Good,” said Yuno as she nodded and turned towards Murasaki.

“Disregarding whatever I saw earlier, this is my first time meeting a *Kuhouin*”

“Likewise, you are the first member of the *Houzuki* family that I have met.”

Murasaki glared at Yuno as if she were looking at an enemy and spoke in a low voice. All of this appeared to be an attempt to intimidate Yuno.

“Shinkuro, show this woman out at once.”

Murasaki pointed confidently towards the door.

“She has been a nuisance the entire morning. Why are you affiliated with—?”

“Murasaki, before you finish your sentence, can you do just one thing?”

“What?”

"Put some clothes on."

"That can wait until later. First, this unpleasant woman must—"

"Put some clothes on."

After Shinkurou repeated himself, Murasaki reluctantly obeyed. This was probably only because she noticed the cold winter air that filled the room.

While Murasaki dressed herself, Shinkurou continued his conversation with Yuno.

"What was all of that?"

"So you still don't know about these kind of strange things. I'm sorry, it's just that my grandfather was really irresponsible—"

"Hey, Shinkurou! Do not associate with that woman! She will corrupt you!"

"Hurry up and get dressed."

Murasaki groaned as she continued to struggle with her clothes. Murasaki did not seem like much of a morning person as she could not keep her hand away from her mouth. Though, it would be better if she were a morning person since she was too tired to even put on her socks sitting up.

Shinkurou saw that Murasaki was having trouble buttoning her clothes up and went to help her, but Yuno, being closer, was able to do so first. When Yuno reached her hand out towards her, Murasaki, startled, seemed like she would run away. However, Yuno's hand would not permit her to do so. Yuno had a younger sister and had become rather skilled when dealing with children. Before Murasaki could object, Yuno quickly buttoned her clothes and smiled brightly.

"There, all better."

"Th—Thank you."

"How wonderful. You know how to properly thank someone."

Murasaki looked towards Shinkurou and then said in a small voice:

"...This is the fault of a particularly annoying person."

Yuno accidentally let out a small chuckle as if she had guessed who Murasaki was referring to. After all, it was Yuno who had taught Shinkurou proper etiquette.

"Shinkurou. I will be waiting at the dojo after school."

"Huh, the dojo?"

"The most important thing to do now is to purge your unhealthy urges."

"No, but I'm not—"

"Your answer?"

"...Yes, I'll be there."

Yuno was smiling but Shinkurou knew better than to take her smile at face value. This was because Yuno was

always smiling despite her true emotions.

Shinkurou told Murasaki that he would be home late from the dojo but then, Yuno made a suggestion.

"You are welcome to come as well, Murasaki. It would be a pleasure to have dinner with you."

"Is that really okay?"

Yuno nodded. Now, the sole deciding factor was Murasaki's response.

When Shinkurou looked at Murasaki, she still stared at Yuno with lingering wariness. She then replied:

"Are you being sincere? I am a Kuhouin of the three *familles supérieures*<sup>1</sup>"

...The three *familles supérieures*?

Shinkurou could not recall having ever hearing this phrase before. However, Yuno seemed to understand and smiled calmly. Murasaki gave Yuno another suspicious look but then, as if giving in to her request, let out a sigh.

"...Very well. I am somewhat interested in the dwellings of an *inférieure*<sup>2</sup>."

"Then, I will be happily waiting for your arrival."

After finishing the conversation, Yuno pulled out an apron from the bag she had been holding and put it on. Looking like a young wife, she began to clean the house. Shinkurou liked to keep things clean. In fact, he was in charge of keeping the public areas of the complex clean. However, he was no match for Yuno. Yuno opened the window to let out the stagnant air in the room.

"Now you two, roll up your futons. Be good children and wait for your delicious breakfast."

"Why do I have to do something like that," said Murasaki but when Shinkurou began to fold his futon, she decided to do it as well. Was it because she did not want to show any signs of weakness in front of Yuno?

Yuno smiled as she looked at them and said, "Oh, that's right," while handing Shinkurou a paper bag.

"I found this on your doorstep."

Shinkurou peeked inside the bag and saw a videotape and a notepad. In the notepad, Tamaki had written some words of gratitude for Shinkurou who always lent her rice. She also mentioned that the videotape was a gift in return for his kindness. Despite being a crude person, she did have her redeeming qualities.

*This can't be another porn video*, thought Shinkurou as he took the tape out of the bag to inspect it. Surely enough, the title read *Seductive Young Fairies*. There was a small note written neatly in black permanent marker that read *porn*.

Shinkurou felt a bit uneasy and turned to look behind him.

Yuno was staring at him.

She had seen through everything and simply smiled.

At that moment, the only thing in Shinkurou's mind was resentment for Tamaki, resentment that came all the way from the bottom of his heart.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

Translation Notes and References

1. French for *upper families*.

2. French for *lower*.

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-3**

After classes ended, Shinkuro went back to May Rain Manor to fetch Murasaki so that they could go to the Houzuki's together. Murasaki admired the passing scenery on the train but as they drew closer to their destination, she became silent and Shinkuro saw that the joy had faded away from Murasaki's face. This made Shinkuro worried.

"Are you okay? If you're not feeling well..."

"There is something that I want to confirm."

Murasaki said this with such a serious tone that Shinkuro stayed silent and waited for her to continue.

"Will you swear to protect me?"

"...How can you say that after all this time. Of course I will protect you."

"Even if a Houzuki, like that woman Yuno, were to attack me?"

"Well about that..."

"Shinkuro Kurenai, are you my ally?"

If Yuno or someone from her family were to attack Murasaki, Shinkuro would defend Murasaki. Shinkuro thought something like that would only happen if the Sun started rising from the west but from what he saw, Murasaki's question was sincere.

Deciding to tackle the situation professionally, Shinkuro gave Murasaki a serious answer.

"I am on your side. Whoever it may be, I swear that I will protect you. Is that good enough for you?"

Murasaki looked up at Shinkuro without saying a word. However, her worries had been quelled.

"I am in your hands."

"You know, we don't have to go if you don't want to ..."

"I am not going to run away."

Then, Murasaki declared in a childish voice, "Things I do not like will not disappear even if I run away from them. That is why I have accepted her invitation."

Shinkuro felt like he had said something similar once before. However, Shinkuro definitely did not have the courage she possessed.

The two of them arrived at the Houzuki house gate. Their home was an old fashioned Japanese home located in a

corner suburb a fair distance from the city. It had been built before the war and was solidly made. Shinkurou had been told that the missing roof tiles had fallen off and broken during the *Great Kanto earthquake*<sup>1</sup>. The house was located on a spacious plot of land surrounded by a beautiful gate and could easily be mistaken for the home of a politician or the *yakuza*<sup>2</sup>. He could easily tell that it was no ordinary home.

Shinkurou opened the gate and the two of them walked through. They arrived at the main building and Shinkurou reached out to press the intercom but stopped himself. He always forgot that he had a spare key to the mansion.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-3**

---

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#### Translation Notes and References

1. The Great Kanto Earthquake was an earthquake of approximately magnitude 8.0 occurring in Japan on 1st September 1923.

2. Yakuza refers to Japanese organized crime syndicates.

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-4**

Looking at Murasaki, Shinkuro noticed how nervous she seemed. Even though the Houzuki's home was large, it probably paled in comparison to the Kuhouin's. What then, could be making her so nervous? Shinkuro had asked Murasaki several times on their way there but received no answer. Societal norms usually dictated that talkative children were clever. However, this was not entirely true. In truth, clever children did not speak thoughtlessly. In short, they only say what is appropriate. Therefore, Shinkuro was starting to doubt Murasaki's cleverness.

*Yuno seems to know something too, what could it be...*

As Shinkuro unlocked the door and opened it, he looked at Murasaki from the corner of his eye.

"Pardon the intrusion."

Although he did not say this very loudly, the presence of a moderately loud echo made Shinkuro aware of how polite he was being. Shinkuro had grown so accustomed to being polite that it was just easier for him to act that way.

Shinkuro took off his shoes and stepped up from the *genkan*<sup>1</sup>. As Shinkuro stepped onto the floor, he noticed that unlike the floorboards at May Rain Manor, the ones here were sturdy and did not creak. While Shinkuro waited for Murasaki to take her shoes off, he heard the faint sounds of footsteps from further within the house. Turning around to locate the origins of the footsteps, Shinkuro bumped into a small girl standing at his feet.

"I-It's been a while."

Shinkuro looked down at the young girl.

"Hey, Chii-chan."

Chizuru, the second daughter of the Houzuki family, looked up at Shinkuro from within his shadow, gave Shinkuro an embarrassed smile before bowing.

"...Welcome home."

She was the youngest girl in the house and due to her extreme fear of strangers, she hardly ever went out. Even at kindergarten, she did not make friends and played by herself. Chizuru only opened her heart to her family. The only reason Shinkuro was included was probably due to the fact that he had lived with the Houzuki's since before she was born.

Chizuru seemed exceptionally happy to meet Shinkuro again after such a long time. Embracing his legs tightly, she was unwilling to let go. She swung left and right as she hugged Shinkuro's legs and then looked up at him, giving him another embarrassed smile.

"Shinkuro, who is this kid?"

Murasaki, having only just taken her shoes off, pointed at Chizuru, who was younger than she was.

"She is Chizuru, Yuno's younger sister. Chii-chan, this is Murasaki Kuhouin. The two of you become good friends, okay?"

Chizuru, still clinging to Shinkurou, looked out from behind Shinkurou's legs at Murasaki.

"If big brother says so, then I will be your friend."

"You were so quiet that I could not hear what you said very well."

Openly showing her displeasure for Murasaki, Chizuru started to tear up and hid in Shinkurou's shadow.

Despite being around the same age, their personalities were dramatically different.

*Their personalities will change as they grow older. Unless they are more deeply rooted in who they are, in which case they will remain the same for the most part, like myself.*

Shinkurou thought this as the two girls looked up at him. Then, Yuno appeared from within the house, walking with a flowing gait.

"Welcome, both of you."

"...Why are you wearing that?"

Yuno was wearing a red *hakama*<sup>2</sup>.

"Are they not befitting on me?"

Yuno suddenly changed her manner of speaking.

As she already had quintessential Japanese features, the *hakama* was almost too well-suited to her.

"Actually, I recently got a part time job at an acquaintance's shrine as a shrine maiden."

Yuno started to talk about the troubles she had at work. It seemed like things such as foreign tourists and male visitors who would persistently make advances on her kept her busy at work. Apparently, the priest was so pleased with her performance that he gave her the *hakama* set as a reward.

*Yuno being there probably increased the number of visitors,* figured Shinkurou.

"I thought you might like this so I put it on as quickly as I could."

Smiling, Yuno asked, "How is it?" to which Shinkurou could only reply honestly.

"It looks wonderful."

"Does it turn you on?"

"...A little."

"I'm so glad. It just fills me with so much joy to see that you back on track."

"Uh, I may have said this before, but I'm not a lolicon."

"Yes, I know. However, it did not change how I felt."

The minds of women are a mystery. Shinkuro felt that the minds of men and women were on completely different levels and were uniquely designed. *There is no way to understand them. Could love be the motivation behind people trying to understand the opposite sex? Could that be what I'm missing?*

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-4**

---

---

#### Translation Notes and References

1. Genkan (玄関) A small and often lowered space at the entrance of Japanese homes where one takes off their shoes.
2. Hakama (袴) Traditional Japanese pants worn over a kimono.

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-5**

“Shinkurou.”

Murasaki tugged at Shinkurou’s clothes, a question mark appearing above her head as she looked up towards him.

“What is this *lolicon* you speak of?”

Chizuru also looked up towards Shinkurou expectantly, who was currently at a complete loss for words.

Both of them waited patiently, naive curiosity apparent on their faces.

Shinkurou, bathed in the light of their pure looks from both sides, ultimately decided not to give an answer.

“It’s better that you two don’t know.”

“Why is that?”

“...W–Why?”

As Shinkurou struggled with providing the girls with an adequate answer, Yuno took it upon herself to spare Shinkurou the pain.

“A lolicon is a bad person. Not listening to his older sister and going off to live by himself; not talking to his older sister at school very much; not calling his older sister; not inviting his older sister over to spend time with him and keeping everything secret, making her feel lonely... These are all things that a bad person does.”

“Shinkurou is not a bad person.”

Chizuru nodded in agreement to Murasaki’s statement.

It seemed that their view of Shinkurou’s character was fairly similar.

Yuno, with a large smile upon her face, nodded.

“That’s what I believe too. Shinkurou is not that kind of person.”

As if confirming what Yuno had said, all three girls looked at Shinkurou. Shinkurou smiled faintly.

*I want to become a man that’s good enough for that place*, thought Shinkurou.

“...Yuno, let’s go to the dojo.”

Whenever Shinkurou visited the Houzuki house, he would practice with Yuno. As Shinkurou and Yuno headed for the dojo, Murasaki decided that she would observe what they were about to do. At first, Murasaki hesitated but both her abundant interest and her desire to appear less of a child than Chizuru drove her to overcome her wariness.

"Allow me to watch this *training* that you and Yuno will be doing."

"Absolutely not."

"Why is that?"

"It's not something children should see."

"...Is it something perverted?"

"It's nothing of that sort! Just wait patiently over there!"

Shinkuro pointed to Chizuru, who showed Murasaki to a room further in the house. Murasaki followed her reluctantly. Murasaki took large strides impulsively, as if she could not accept being placed on the same level as the younger Chizuru.

Yuno put her hand over her mouth and began to giggle as she watched the situation transpire before her eyes.

"What was all that about training just now? It made my heart skip a beat."

"Let's just hurry and get to the dojo."

"What are we going to do when we get there?"

"Train, of course!"

"Ah, is that so."

Pushing Yuno from behind, Shinkuro headed for the dojo.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-5**

---

---

Translation Notes and References

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-6**

Yuno seemed to be in a good mood, although it may not have been because of her practice with Shinkurou. When it came to fighting, she did not allow her emotions to get in the way. This was true for all members of the Houzuki family.

They had decided to practice for an hour and within that hour, Shinkurou was hit, kicked and thrown well over a hundred times till the brink of collapse.

“Okay, that’s enough for today.”

Yuno said nonchalantly to Shinkurou, who, unlike her, was drenched in sweat.

Shinkurou crawled to the middle of the dojo where Yuno sat in the *seiza* position. He no longer had the energy to sit up. Shinkurou wondered how she could still be sitting like that. As he collapsed, he bowed his head.

“...Thank you.”

“There’s no need for that.”

*As beautiful as always in the seiza position.* After admiring Yuno, Shinkurou’s strength left him and he lay down on the floor. Metal sheets lay underneath the floorboards of the dojo while the walls were made with reinforced concrete. Despite looking very much like a dojo, it was also very similar to a jail cell. Shinkurou bathed in the fluorescent light raining down from the dojo’s high ceilings, trying to catch his breath. His entire body was in pain, especially his right arm. However, the fatigue was pleasant. Having used up all of his stamina, the only sensation he could still feel was pleasure.

Shinkurou began studying martial arts because it was convenient for him then. The style he studied was simply known as the Houzuki style. However, there was something that differentiated it from other styles. The basics of the Houzuki style could be taught to anyone. There would be differences depending on the individual but anyone could reproduce the basics. That did not change the style’s lack catholicity though. The prerequisites were far too strict for that. One could board a paper plane but that did not mean that it could fly. Things took shape piece by piece. The Houzuki style was similar in this respect.

“Well, it seems like I won’t have a problem passing down this killing style with you around...”

Housen Houzuki, Shinkurou’s master, presented him with the Houzuki style in this manner. Before Yuno had been born, he seemed to have had other disciples, the dojo being built around that time. However, as of now, Shinkurou was his only disciple. *I have this huge dojo and Yuno and Housen’s undivided attention all to myself,* thought Shinkurou.

Yuno gently wiped Shinkurou’s face with a towel as he continued trying to catch his breath. Shinkurou wanted to tell her to stop pitying him but did not have the energy to even start forming the syllables.

The way that Yuno tenderly caressed his face with the cold towel made Shinkurou close his eyes in sheer bliss.

Shinkurou remembered the first time they met.

Shinkurou was in second grade. He had lost his family all of a sudden. He had lost every single one of his precious family members. Shinkurou wanted to die. He wanted to meet his family again. But he could not die. He was too weak. Despite having lost his family, he did not have the courage to kill himself. Ginko's family took custody of him and he spent his days as a mere shell of his former self. Shinkurou did not really remember much of what happened during that time. It was not a time he really wanted to remember. Ginko and her parents fussed over him and treated him kindly, but the Shinkurou of that time did not care about anything. He was lonely; he was sad; he wanted to die; he did not want to die; he had become all alone; he wanted someone to be there for him. His mind was all over the place.

Then, the incident happened. Ginko did the unexpected and forced Shinkurou to come with her to the local youth center. She started getting worried after Shinkurou had holed himself in for some time. She probably brought him along because there would be a lot of kids around his age. But, Shinkurou did not cheer up. Ginko then tried to shift his attention to manga and games to no avail, as he would still refuse to speak to or answer anyone. He would simply sit in the corner of the room with his arms wrapped around his knees, a vacant look on his face. Still, Ginko remained by the wordless Shinkurou's side. At that time, anything he said would have made her happy. Eventually, Ginko let out a sigh and said, "Well, let's go home" but Shinkurou grabbed her hand. Suddenly, noise erupted from all around them. The screaming of adults, the cries of children, and the gunshots. All at once, the large bodies of several foreigners filled the room, machine guns in their hands, like those on television. It was impossible to know why they were there. They took all the children, including Ginko and Shinkurou and loaded them into a truck. Several men got into the back of the truck with them and told them, "If you open your mouths, we will kill you" in very brief Japanese. It seemed that one child did not understand and as he started panicking, one of the men pulled the trigger, making the sound of gunfire echo around them as the child's head exploded like a tomato. Another child, who yelled at them to stop, had his head blown apart as well, some of it spraying onto Shinkurou's face. Ginko, who was sitting next to the boy, almost burst into tears before Shinkurou quickly covered her mouth. The stimulation of the situation had brought him back to his old senses and he was once again able to act. Shinkurou could not discern what was outside from the damaged parts of the trucks canopy and thus was unable to tell where they were headed. The bodies of the dead children were discarded and while the remaining children were frightened and tried to keep quiet, Shinkurou was busy pondering. They were all foreigners. They committed a mass abduction in broad daylight. It was commonly believed that something like this would never happen in Japan but these foreigners had easily proven that thought wrong. Shinkurou had seen something like this on the news before. There were foreign slave-trading organizations established in Japan. There had already been an incident in a rural mountain village where dozens of people had been abducted. They were simply replenishing their stock. The police had acted upon the situation but several powerful foreign mafias were pulling the strings in the background. Thus, the situation became political and little progress was made. *Could they be the same people?* thought Shinkurou. By the time they got off of the truck, the sun had already set. Despite that, Shinkurou was able to see a ship. It seems they were at a harbor. The children were forced to line up in rows and began to walk, boarding a large freighter, the sole ship moored there. The several Japanese nearby seemed to all be accomplices, looking at the children with cold stares, as if they were nothing but objects.

The hold of the ship was filled with darkness after the men closed its top. Naturally, all the children began to cry. Other than Shinkurou, everyone cried. Even Ginko, who had always been so strong, was crying.

"What are we going to do, Shinkurou? What's going to happen to us, Shinkurou? Tell me, Shinkurou!"

"We've been sold, Ginko. All of us, we're going to be brought to a foreign country and then we'll be sold."

Ginko clung to Shinkurou, "That's not true, there's no way that's true!" said Ginko as she cried. Shinkurou did not cry. Crying was unnecessary. This was because for Shinkurou, things were in his favor. He was not sad. He was a bit

scared, but he was definitely happy, more than anything else.

*I can kill myself. If things continue like this, I will be able to kill myself.*

*The healthy kids will be sold. The pretty kids. The smart kids. I don't have any of those qualities. On the contrary, I have a weak body and a weak spirit; the chances of me dying before we get to the next port is high. I was too scared to kill myself but in this hopeless situation that I cannot run away from, I will kill myself. Ah, I can finally die. I can finally meet them. Dad, mom, big sis, I can finally meet them again. I'm so happy.*

Unexpectedly, his chance came very soon. The door of the hold opened and the criminals came in. They kicked a boy out of the way and picked a girl, forcing her to stand up. Then, they picked out different boys and girls, perhaps to keep them somewhere else. From the strange stares the men gave, it was highly likely that they had different ideas for the girls. One of the men grabbed Ginko's arm, causing her to let out a deafening scream. As if he was evaluating a product, the man tore off her clothes, which made Ginko slap the man on the face. *I always knew that Ginko was strong*, thought Shinkuro. The man cursed at Ginko in another language before pointing his gun at her. Shinkuro stood up and shielded Ginko. *I will help my friend. Then, I can die. This is the absolute best. I have no more complaints.* Without listening to what Ginko was saying behind him, Shinkuro waited for the muzzle of the gun to send him to his maker.

Suddenly, a lone woman appeared.

She was young and wore a trench coat, appearing Japanese but standing out almost too much. She had the gait of a boss and as she walked into the hold, everyone moved out of her way. With a cigarette in her mouth and rings of smoke puffing from it, her appearance made the dumbfounded men begin to curse and point their guns at her. The men made to fight her but she took them all out with ease, coming through like a whirlwind of power. All the children were frightened by the gruesome sight before them. Even Ginko hid behind Shinkuro as she looked on. The only one with a different reaction was Shinkuro.

*This is it*, he thought.

*This is strength*, he thought.

Shinkuro's desire to die had faded away. He wanted to become like her; he wanted her strength; he may have even wanted to continue to live. His family may not have been in this world anymore, but he may just have wanted to live again.

In a matter of seconds, things had calmed down and the woman returned with several of her men and children whom she had rescued. When she approached, Shinkuro walked towards her. This was one of Shinkuro Kurenai's crossroads in life.

"Don't do it, Shinkuro! That person is scary! It's dangerous to go near her. If you're influenced by someone like her, it will be really bad!"

Ignoring Ginko, Shinkuro went before the woman and pleaded, "Please make me your apprentice."

The woman flicked the ashes from her cigarette before looking down at Shinkuro dubiously.

"Why?"

"I want to become stronger."

"Why?"

"So that I can live."

Shinkurou was unsure if what he said would move her but she stared at him for a while before telling him to follow her. Shinkurou followed her, ignoring Ginko's pleas for him to stop.

The woman took out another cigarette and asked him another question.

"Your name?"

"Shinkurou Kurenai."

"What a coincidence. Your name shares a character with mine."<sup>1</sup>

After chuckling for a while, the woman said, "My name is Benika Juuzawa." She went on to say, "I did not learn to be strong from anyone. Therefore, I can't teach others to become strong."

After that, she took Shinkurou to the Houzuki household.

Benika told the master of the house, "Master Houzuki. This brat is a little interesting, please test him out."

Blanketed in excitement and nervousness, Shinkurou bowed at Housen Houzuki. Beside him was a girl around Shinkurou's age. It was Yuno, who simply stared at him.

It had been eight years since then. That incident had turned Shinkurou into a well-rounded person.

Shinkurou, who was allowed to become an apprentice and live with the Houzuki's, followed all of Housen's directions and devoted himself to learning everything about the Houzuki style. There was never a point where he did not break every bone in his body. He had things broken and smashed; he faced many crushing defeats and the positions of his internal organs had changed, all as a result of his training. His body had been molded into an aberration. His bone and flesh was changed to suit the power of the Houzuki's.

Ginko was furious. She was furious with Shinkurou's strange way of thinking. She was furious for being unable to understand him.

Time and time again, Ginko would try to persuade Shinkurou to stop but Shinkurou would not listen to her.

*Everything was so that I could become stronger, no matter the cost.*

*If it was necessary, I did it, no matter what.*

*For me, someone who had lost his family, it was necessary for me to become stronger so that I could continue living.*

*So I persisted. I endeavored. But, in the end this...*

"Shinkurou?"

Shinkurou reopened his eyes upon hearing Yuno's tender voice. He had regained about thirty percent of his strength. This resilience was also a result of his training.

He placed his hand on the floor and lifted himself up before Yuno started talking to him.

"You've become more accustomed to that body."

"...Yeah, somewhat."

His right arm hurt. His veins were protruding and the pain spread throughout his entire body. This was probably normal due to the foreign object placed within him. While it may have seemed bad now, it was already much easier

to deal with than before. The night he had it put into his body, the pain made him feel as if he was going to die. Yuno stayed by his side to tend to him the entire time. She did not sleep so that she could hold Shinkurou's hand and comfort him with her voice. Shinkurou believed that it was thanks to Yuno that he was able to overcome that ordeal.

"It doesn't seem like you can use it in actual combat yet. Even now, we still don't know how much damage it has caused to your body. The worst-case scenario is that it has shortened your lifespan. That's why you were prohibited from using it until you got grandpa's permission."

"It's not like I wanted this to extend my life though."

Had Benika not shown up, he would have died protecting Ginko.

Shinkurou had chosen this life. But, was it really the right choice? Did he succeed in achieving his goal?

"Don't say things like that."

The face Yuno made was like that of an older sister scolding her younger brother.

"The human body is fragile. It's easily broken. However, it is important for you to be able to use it for your entire life. So, please take care of it. I want to spend the rest of my life with you from now on."

Shinkurou was thankful for her concern, laughing bashfully.

"What was that? It sounded like a proposal."

Yuno's face turned red as she cleared her throat.

"D-Did it? Well, if a gentleman were to say that to me I would probably..."

"Huh?"

"It's nothing, nothing at all!"

Yuno quickly changed the subject after clearing her throat once more.

"Anyway, please work on getting rid of any perverse thoughts you may have every day."

"Okay."

"Throw away any indecent videos that you may have."

"...Okay."

"You are around that age, Shinkurou. It can't be helped if you start taking interest in such things. 'Ah, Yuno is so cute today.' 'I wonder what color her underwear is.' You've probably thought this kind of things."

"I've never really..."

"You're supposed to."

"No..."

"You are supposed to."

Yuno had arrived at her conclusion. Her face clearly showed her displeasure.

"...Ah, yes. I have thought about that sometimes."

"That is not good at all! Really, what am I going to do with you Shinkurou...?"

Yuno scolded him despite seeming a bit happy.

*What is with her*, thought Shinkurou, complaining to himself. Of course, he did not say it out loud.

Because he had so much to thank Yuno for, he dared not defy her.

"What I said earlier was something I heard from a health specialist. If men hold in their urges, it could be bad for their health. So, if you find yourself unable to bear it anymore, please tell me."

"What?"

Yuno explained it more clearly for Shinkurou, who was completely shaken by what she had said.

"Until all your perverted thoughts have gone away, I'll work you to the bone. Are you happy now?"

"...I'm honored."

Having now become her apprentice, he had no choice but to smile and nod.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-6**

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#### Translation Notes and References

1. The first character in Benika's name and the character for Shinkurou's last name both are 紅 (Beni/Kurenai) meaning crimson.

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-7**

Shinkuro went outside and drew some water from the well. The freezing water made Shinkuro shiver as he washed the sweat from his body. After drying himself off with a towel, he headed down the open corridor. Making his way to the living room, he suddenly came to a stop. Before him was his former room. Shinkuro opened the door and saw that the study table he had once used was still there. It was now spotlessly clean; there was not a speck of dust in sight. The room was much more spacious than his apartment at May Rain Manor and it seemed very bright due to how clean it was.

*You are welcome to come back whenever you wish. Just how many times had his master told him this?*

*...There's no way that's going to happen.*

Before his memories came flooding back to him, Shinkuro closed the door. He proceeded to the living room and was surprised to find Murasaki obediently waiting for him. She sat in front of the television, watching anime as she sipped juice with a straw. Shinkuro tried to move closer to her subtly but Chizuru, who was also watching anime with Murasaki, saw him and immediately ran over to him. Shinkuro caught her and lifted her small body into the air. Shinkuro then changed her diaper; Chizuru was like a little sister to him.

"Humph, what a child."

Glancing at what was happening from the corner of her eye, Murasaki bit the straw, disinterested.

"What's she so angry about?"

Shinkuro, somewhat shocked upon hearing this, saw that Yuno and Chizuru's mother, Meiri, had come from the kitchen. She began asking if Shinkuro had all his daily necessities but then once it seemed like she was about to offer him some money, Shinkuro, now panicked, refused to accept anything. Shinkuro told Meiri that she had already helped him plenty, to which she replied that he did not have to be so modest. Since it looked like Chizuru wanted to help, Shinkuro set her down on the floor. Shinkuro watched as Chizuru chased after her mother, disappearing into the kitchen, then turned toward Murasaki, who seemed jealous for some reason.

"Did you enjoy your *practice*?"

"Well, more or less."

"It took you so long that I figured you had forgotten about me."

Murasaki put her straw in her mouth and whisked it about in her juice.



They had been separated for less than an hour, but Murasaki seemed upset, thinking that Shinkurou had abandoned her.

“...Look, I’m sorry.”

“Do you remember what you promised me?”

“No matter what happens or who it is, I will protect you. But everyone here is nice, right?”

“You still do not understand.”

Murasaki could tell that Shinkurou had completely let his guard down. Was she still worried that he would leave her?

Was there still something that she was uneasy about?

Shinkurou wanted answers but soon after that, his master came home. He put his question on hold and greeted his master.

Shinkurou’s master, Houzuki Hozan, was well in his seventies. He had the air of an early Showa era scholar; it would be difficult for one to picture him fighting. However, Benika had asserted that “He’s someone I would never want to get in a one on one fight with,” acknowledging his superiority when compared to her.

“...Are you the current head of the Houzuki family?”

Murasaki looked like she was going to run and hide but glared at Hozan instead as she posed her question. It was at times like these that Shinkurou had to support Murasaki, and so, he stood by her side.

Murasaki’s attitude reminded Hozan of his own grandchildren, which made him smile. The Houzuki’s had basically nothing but calm leaders. Shinkurou, who had lived part of his life with the Houzuki’s, had learned that the strong excel in controlling their emotions.

“Little missus, do you want some roasted sweet potatoes?”

It looks like Hozan had bought some on his way back from the local *go*<sup>1</sup> parlor. He pulled out a moderately large piece from a paper bag and broke it apart in front of Murasaki. Steam rose from the golden filling and a faint sweet fragrance wafted in the air. Once again, her appetite won out and she seemed drawn to the baked sweet potato. Hozan brought the sweet potato closer to his mouth but before eating it, he stopped to think and gestured towards Shinkurou.

“Check it for poison.”

Shinkurou, shocked by Hozan’s cautiousness, took a bite of the sweet potato. Only once he had ascertained that it was safe did Murasaki begin to eat some as well. Murasaki stuffed her cheeks full of sweet potato and let out an “Oh” in astonishment before proceeding to take another bite, dedicating her all to eating it.

Murasaki then stopped eating to thank Hozan.

“It is delicious. Thank you.”

“What is? What is?”

Hozan laughed calmly and started handing Shinkurou a sweet potato but found Yuno in his way.

“Stop it, grandpa. Has anyone even eaten dinner yet?”

“Ah, sorry,” said Hozan, scratching his head, “So why are you wearing a hakama?”

"No particular reason."

"Does Shinkurou like that look?"

"There's no particular reason."

After having that strange conversation, Hozen took the sweet potato and disappeared into the kitchen.

Yuno began staring at Shinkurou's face.

"Does this suit me?

"Yeah."

"Does it turn you on?"

"...Yeah, I guess."

"Then I'll keep wearing it."

After saying that, Yuno went to the kitchen, a bright smile on her face.

*I don't really get it but Yuno seems to be in good spirits so I guess it's okay,* thought Shinkurou. Not long afterward, Chizuru came out of the kitchen. Shinkurou stood up to help her since she was carrying a large plate by herself but Murasaki pulled him back down by his shirt.

"Do wot weave my swide."

Shinkurou could not hear what she said very well because her mouth was full of sweet potato but he figured what she meant to say was, "Do not leave my side." Unable to let what had just happened pass, Chizuru spoke up to Murasaki.

"...Spoiled brat."

Murasaki, now angry, prepared to make a retort at Chizuru but her mouth was full of partially chewed sweet potato. She went to get something to drink but by the time she had finished, Chizuru had already gone back to the kitchen. Murasaki began eating her sweet potato again, glaring at Shinkurou who was laughing and made an angry remark.

"That impertinent brat."

*Just like you,* thought Shinkurou. Since he figured there was not much he could do about it, he remained by Murasaki's side.

Everyone sat around a large ebony table and dinner was brought out right on cue. The meal consisted of quintessential Japanese dishes such as meat and potatoes, pork miso soup, grilled fish and sashimi. Shinkurou enjoyed the familiar flavors; Murasaki, who was sitting next to him, could not stop eating as well. They spoke about Yuno's father, who was on a business trip, and gossiped. When Yuno finished, both she and Meiri began to clean up.

"Murasaki, do you want to take a bath with Chi?"

Murasaki took a moment to think over Yuno's question.

"The Houzuki's bath is amazing."

Murasaki hesitated for a moment but upon hearing Shinkurou say this she began to show interest.

"What is so amazing about it?"

"It's made completely out of wood."

"Oh, a bath made out of wood?"

"It's a citron bath today."

Yuno added this as she listened to their conversation.

"Floating citrus fruits and made out of wood, hmm..."

Her curiosity getting the better of herself, Murasaki soon nodded in acceptance. To avoid any misunderstanding with Yuno, Shinkurou made sure to tell Murasaki that she had to wear a towel into the bath.

"I suppose that is fine."

Murasaki agreed upon hearing Shinkurou's request before heading to the bath with Chizuru.

After the children left, Yuno placed fresh tea and roasted sweet potatoes, which she had taken from the refrigerator, on the table.

"That Benika, she's asked you to handle another troublesome job."

Hozan made such a remark as he took a small bite of a sweet potato.

"You are well known in the underworld, so it's strange that she would put a Kuhouin child in your care. Seriously, that woman can be so careless, you would think that she would better consider the circumstances..."

Shinkurou had a question for Hozan but decided to let his master finish before he spoke. Normally, Shinkurou would not be so formal with Yuno, Meiri or Chizuru but as one would expect, he exercised his best manners when his master was around. Normally, Yuno would scold Shinkurou for something like this, saying that he was being too reserved, but the current situation was different. If nothing else, the one lesson his master taught him that would always remain with Shinkurou was the one about respecting his elders.

Yuno noticed Shinkurou's hesitation and asked in his stead.

"Grandpa, this is completely unrelated, but don't you think that you should tell Shinkurou soon?"

"...Well, I suppose that now is a good time."

Hozan closed his eyes as if he were thinking about something while sipping his tea. Shinkurou took a sip of his tea as well while Yuno carefully peeled the skin off a sweet potato and offered Shinkurou some. As Shinkurou thanked Yuno, he thought to himself, *I can do that much by myself*. Hozan, who had a sweet tooth, chose the warmest sweet potato, as those would be the sweetest. As Hozan did this, Shinkurou waited for him to begin speaking.

Hozan opened his eyes, rubbing his chin before he spoke.

"Before I begin, you have asked me about this before. This time, I am going to give you an honest answer."

"I see."

Hozan seemed a bit nervous as he stole a glance at Shinkurou.

"Are you already done?"

"With what?"

"The problems of letting you live alone have only just begun. Are you already finished with Yuno?"

Yuno, who was sitting next to Shinkurou, began to choke on her tea. Shinkurou pat her back and after thanking Shinkurou, she began to confront Hozen about what he had just said.

"G-Grandpa! How could you say something so tactless out of the blue!"

"Tactless, you say. Hasn't Shinkurou gone off and became a man with an older woman?"

"That's so dirty! It's unchaste!"

"He is stubborn. I was once Shinkurou's age so..."

"Shinkurou is not that kind of person!"

"Could it be that you didn't realize? Shinkurou, she is the granddaughter of your master so you don't have to restrain yourself, you know? I want you to understand that. You still went after someone else even though Yuno gave you so many love letters..."

"That's not true! That is not what has happened at all!"

"You keep going on about how he is, what are you going to do if you get left behind?"

"Don't worry! I will show him how to be a proper person! Right, Shinkurou?"

Shinkurou thought to himself, *Why is she checking with me*, before giving a vague reply.

"Yeah..."

Hozen, who had grown rather excited, was very open when it came to encouraging a relationship between his granddaughter and Shinkurou. When Shinkurou decided to move out of the Houzuki's home, it was Hozen who recommended May Rain Manor to him and told him about the surrounding area. However, Hozen seemed to have misunderstood Shinkurou's reason for moving out. The current misunderstanding was because Shinkurou would not tell his true reason for wanting to move out. For some reason, Shinkurou remained adamant about keeping it vague.

Shinkurou merely looked on, unable to do anything about Yuno and Hozen. Then, Meiri called from somewhere down the hallway.

"Dad, you have a call from Ms. Himura."

"Oh, is that so?"

Hozen walked down the hall and talked on the phone for a while before saying that he would be going out for a moment and left. Yuno explained to Shinkurou that Ms. Himura was an old woman from that go parlor that Hozen had grown fond of, and the two were apparently in a relationship. *We're in the middle of a conversation but he's prioritizing his love affair, that's so like my master.*

"Shinkurou, it's hopeless now."

Amazed by her grandfather's selfishness, Yuno took a deep breath and brewed some more tea.

"His true love is for the family. Right now, he's just fooling around."

Yuno respected her grandfather, though ever since she was young, she had always hated his unfaithful tendencies.

Yuno probably became the way that she is because she grew up seeing how Hozen's wife was always busy and how that had troubled him.

"Do you understand, Shinkurou?"

"Yes."

Yuno nodded happily and set some tea in front of Shinkurou.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-7**

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Translation Notes and References

1. Go (碁) A strategic board game originating from China.

# (NanoDesu) A Translation of the Kurenai Light Novel

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-8**

“Since he’s being so audacious, how about I explain some things to you. It isn’t a particularly complicated story but should you have any questions, please raise your hand.”

“Raise my hand?”

“Call me Yuno-sensei, please.”

Yuno smiled widely and then continued speaking.

“First, the thirteen Familles Inférieures.”

The thirteen Familles Inférieures were modern family lines who had control over the underworld.

The Yugamisora, Ochibana, Kirishima, Endou, Houzuki, Utsuromura, Gouga, Shimizu, Kaien, Mikanagi, Wakuraba, Ajyou and Hoshigami. Currently, about half of the families no longer operated, or, possibly, no longer existed. However, the fame, and infamy of their names continued influencing the underworld.

“Next, there are the three Familles Supérieures.”

The three Familles Supérieures held tremendous influence over the political world. They were the Kuhouin, Kirinzuka and Kouganomiya.

They were all *zaibatsu*<sup>1</sup> and were distinguished even among the most influential families. Shinkuro, like most others, only knew of their names and nothing else.

“The three Familles Supérieures represent open power, while the thirteen Familles Inférieures represent covert power. Heroism and savagery. These eighteen families complement each other and have supported the country through the ages. That’s all in the past, though. Now, the Supérieures have all of the glory while the Inférieures have been on the decline. However, some families, like the Endou, merged with the Supérieures...”

Yuno took a sip of tea, sighed and looked at it. Shinkuro had drunk his tea cold to on numerous occasions as well.

“The three Familles Supérieures and the thirteen Familles Inférieures...”

Yuno put the rest of her sweet potato into her mouth. She then poured Shinkuro some tea that she had warmed up. He thanked her before drinking it.

“...So, is this all real?”

Yuno did not answer him. She simply drank her tea with a demure expression.

Shinkuro pondered for a moment before raising his hand.

“Yuno-sensei, I have a question.”

"Yes, attendee number eight, Shinkurou Kurenai?"

*Who are the others,* thought Shinkurou as he asked his question.

"Is everything you just told me true?"

"Lying to you is the one thing I would never do."

That was the truth. She was the type of person who was always sincere with everyone she encountered.

She never deceived people.

Despite her sincerity, Shinkurou still did not understand what she was talking about.

Shinkurou was well aware that the Houzuki family was far from normal and that they had once been an influential force in the underworld. However, he could never have guessed that they were only one part of a greater entity. The Kuhouin, Kirinzuka and Kouganomiya were all names of zaibatsu that Shinkurou had heard of before, but this was his first time hearing them being referred to as the Familles Supérieures.

*It's like a fairy-tale...*

While Shinkurou thought this to himself, Yuno continued talking.

"While I'm unfortunately not one of them, there are people who can see spirits, and to them, the world is probably overrun with spirits. Dead spirits, evil spirits and many others. This is something that I cannot witness for myself. But, this does not pose as a hindrance to my daily life. What I have told you today is similar. While it is okay to not know about this, even if you do know, it would probably not be very helpful overall. If we were to compare it to a school lesson, the latter would always be more important. However, do not forget what I am about to tell you, Shinkurou. You and I are family, in other words, you are a Houzuki. You are already one of the thirteen Familles Inférieures."

*You're a part of this too,* is what Yuno had essentially said. There was no mistaking that Shinkurou, who had spent so much time with the Houzuki's and would be the first to inherit Hozen's power, was more than qualified to be a Houzuki.

"And Murasaki here is part of the three Familles Supérieures. What's more, she's a daughter of the Kuhouin's, whose power stands out among the other Supérieures. This is why she's so cautious around my family. The Familles Supérieures are like the surface of a clear stream while the Familles Inférieures are like a muddy stream; the two should never come in contact with each other. In other words, we're like a sickness that's to be avoided."

Could this explain the hostile way Murasaki spoke to the Houzuki's?

The other Kuhouins may have been taught her these things.

That was why she was so cautious around Yuno and was so persistent in asking Shinkurou to protect her.

"It is like a tradition for my family for us to order something out when we use the bath. I'm not really sure why, but there seems to be many reasons behind it."

Shinkurou began to think about himself and Murasaki as Yuno spoke.

*An Inférieure and a Supérieure, that sums up what Murasaki and I are. After all this is over I'll continue on as a dispute mediator with moderate success and go on with life without any relatives. Murasaki will probably live a promising life as a Kuhouin. I'm not jealous of her. Though, I do think that it will be a lot of responsibility.*

Just how much pressure would Murasaki have to be under to live up to the expectations of the Kuhouins? Shinkurou did not think that he would have been able to withstand it.

Shinkurou noticed that Yuno's cup was empty. But, as she went to refill it, she paused and stared at the empty cup.

"What's wrong, Yuno?"

"...If you really think about it, it would not be strange for Murasaki to hate my family."

"That's..."

"Shinkurou, the Houzuki's are murderers."

Shinkurou felt as if the room had suddenly become darker. Of course, this was all in his imagination. Nothing was wrong with the ceiling light in the room. Shinkurou understood what Yuno had said, but it was only starting to sink in. They were heading to a dark, dark place. Shinkurou had learned about this and remembered it very well. What the Houzukis taught was the art of killing. There was no way of knowing just how many people on which the Houzuki family had used this skill on. Hozen had retired from this line of work, but his skill set had not died out; it was likely that it would continue to be taught even past Yuno and Chizuru's generations. Others would be taught the art of killing. With a system that had been perfected over the generations.

Yuno continued speaking in a quieter voice than usual.

"If I live with people whose hands were stained with blood, then my hands are stained as well. Isn't that unfair? About what I was told you about my family's skill, I'm glad I was never taught it. If I had inherited that skill and followed the unclean path of my ancestors, I would not be able to go on living."

As Shinkurou, who did not know what to say, looked down in silence, Yuno stared at him before breaking the silence.

"...Are you afraid?"

That's what Yuno said, but what was she really trying to tell Shinkurou? Shinkurou took a guess at the true meaning behind her words.

*Do you regret doing it?*

That was what she had truly said.

What Yuno feared was that Shinkurou regretted having met the Houzukis and being influenced by them.

That was not the case whatsoever.

He was not afraid of the thirteen Familles Inférieures nor the three Familles Supérieures. He was not afraid of inheriting the Houzuki's art of killing.

None of this was what Shinkurou was truly feared.

Shinkurou lifted his head.

"I love you, Yuno. I love everyone else in the Houzuki family too."

They had taken Shinkurou, who was not a relative of theirs, in as their own and raised him with tender yet strict care. There was no limit to just how grateful he was to the Houzukis. Shinkurou was grateful to every last member of the Houzukis.

It was because of this that there were things that he could not tell them. Things that would not be good to tell them.

*...Ah, I have to get back to May Rain Manor soon.*

*I don't want to stay here for too long.*

*I want to get as far away from them as soon as possible*

As Shinkuro put all his effort into not revealing the chaos that were his thoughts, Yuno began to speak in a reserved tone.

"Um... Shinkuro. I have a favor to ask of you."

"Hmm, what?"

"Would you say what you just said once more?"

"Huh? Just now?"

"You know, how you... About me..."

Yuno's face began to turn red and she mumbled as she hesitated to put her thought into words while pressing her index fingers together. As Shinkuro tried to decipher Yuno's unintelligible speech, he could hear the steps of someone coming down the hallway. Shinkuro turned to see who it was and saw Chizuru, who then jumped into his arms, wrapped in a bath towel. Shinkuro carefully caught her and stroked her head, which was still wet.

"Things were just getting good..."

Yuno let out a frustrated breath and grumbled.

"Honestly, you can't maintain your composure for even a moment."

Murasaki calmly came in after Chizuru. She had followed Shinkuro's instructions and wore a bath towel after getting out of the bath. She also appeared to be in good spirits. It seemed that Murasaki was unable to decide whether she liked the full Japanese cypress construction or the citrons more while she had bathed.

Murasaki looked at Chizuru in Shinkuro's arms and scornfully laughed as if to mock her.

"Humph, Stop being such a brat."

She commanded Chizuru like a servant as if she was trying to say, *I would never do something so childish.*

"Listen, Shinkuro. We need to leave soon. Get a change of clothes ready for me."

"Ah..."

It was at that moment that Shinkuro realized that he had forgotten to bring a change of clothes for her. Yuno, having taken notice of this, asked them to wait for a moment before leaving the room.

Meanwhile, Murasaki began to drink some cold barley tea that she had received from Meiri.

"What did you think of the Houzuki family?"

"I am no longer afraid of them. They are the type of people one has to meet rather than hear about. I had read about them in books and heard about them from others but I truly did not know much about them."

"I see."

Shinkurou stroked her head and surprisingly, Murasaki did not seem to dislike it. Murasaki let out a long yawn; it was not strange for her to suddenly start feeling tired. Chizuru, who was even younger than Murasaki, began to doze off. Shinkurou looked at the clock in the room and realized that it was almost the regular time for someone their age to go to bed. Yuno returned with two sets of clothes. Shinkurou decided that he would leave after saying good bye to Meiri. Once Murasaki had confirmed that they would return the clothes she was borrowing, she fell asleep instantly.

"Shinkurou, take these too."

Yuno handed Shinkurou a paper bag which contained several sets of pajamas for children.

"These used to be mine when I was younger. Please give them to Murasaki."

"Thank you, Yuno."

"If she's naked the next time I come over, I'm really going to get angry."

"...She's definitely going to wear them."

Shinkurou piggy-backed Murasaki, which prompted Yuno let out an unintentional chuckle.

"Doing that makes you look like an older brother."

"Really?"

Shinkurou had mixed feelings about what Yuno just said.

*Being relied on as an older sibling. Is that something I can do?*

Shinkurou stopped at the front gate, thanking Yuno once more before walking out onto the dark streets. Shinkurou could feel the relative warmth, typical of a child, of Murasaki on his back as he slowly made his way down the sparsely illuminated streets.

*The three Familles Supérieures and the thirteen Familles Inférieures, huh...*

It was the first time Shinkurou heard of them, though Murasaki was probably already aware of all this. Someone had probably already told her, most probably leaving out the crucial information: who she was and why someone would be after her.

Shinkurou came to the conclusion that it was probably necessary to figure that out.

What kind of life would she go on to live?

How did she feel about eventually taking on the responsibilities of being a Kuhouin?

She probably should have been under considerable pressure, but it did not look like she had wanted to escape the responsibilities.

She was the type of person who would stand up to the challenge.

Shinkurou shivered from the cold wind. Trying to shield Murasaki from the wind, he continued walking. Shinkurou remained vigilant of their surroundings. This area was outside their neighborhood, so there would be people whom Shinkurou would not be familiar with. However, the chance of something happening was very slim.

In the event that something did happen, Shinkurou was prepared to run. There was nothing wrong with running away.

If it boiled down to losing or running, he would choose to run.

There was nothing wrong with that decision. That was why Shinkurou had come to it. That is what he would do from now on.

*...But.*

Shinkurou turned his head to look at Murasaki, who was exhaling softly, fast asleep. She looked like she had been released from a spell, or perhaps having the look of someone who had come to accept everything around her.

Shinkurou began considering his decision.

*There's nothing wrong with running away. But, if there happens to be someone I can't run away from, I will just have to accept defeat. Wouldn't it be a problem if someone like that existed?*

"...Hmm..."

Murasaki muttered something in her sleep, rubbing her cheek against Shinkurou's back.

Shinkurou broke into a genuine smile upon witnessing the scene. It came to him ever so naturally.

Things would be difficult from now on, but it was fine.

Had Benika made the decision for Shinkurou to watch over Murasaki knowing about the relationship between the Supérieures and Inférieures?

If that was the case, it was rather brazen of her. However, seeing her angelic face as she slept was enough to make up for it.

As he felt her pleasant warmth against his back, Shinkurou hurried back to May Rain Manor.

*I need to hurry back.*

He did not want her to catch a cold.

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

**Volume 1**

**Chapter 3-8**

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#### Translation Notes and References

1. Zaibatsu (財閥) Large Japanese conglomerates which typically originated during the Meiji era and had monopolistic control in various economic sectors.